

# Endangered Wolf



**A true story of a Deserted Soul**

*by Neeraj K. Dabgotra*

**MEMOIR ON SOCIAL INJUSTICE**

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## PREFACE

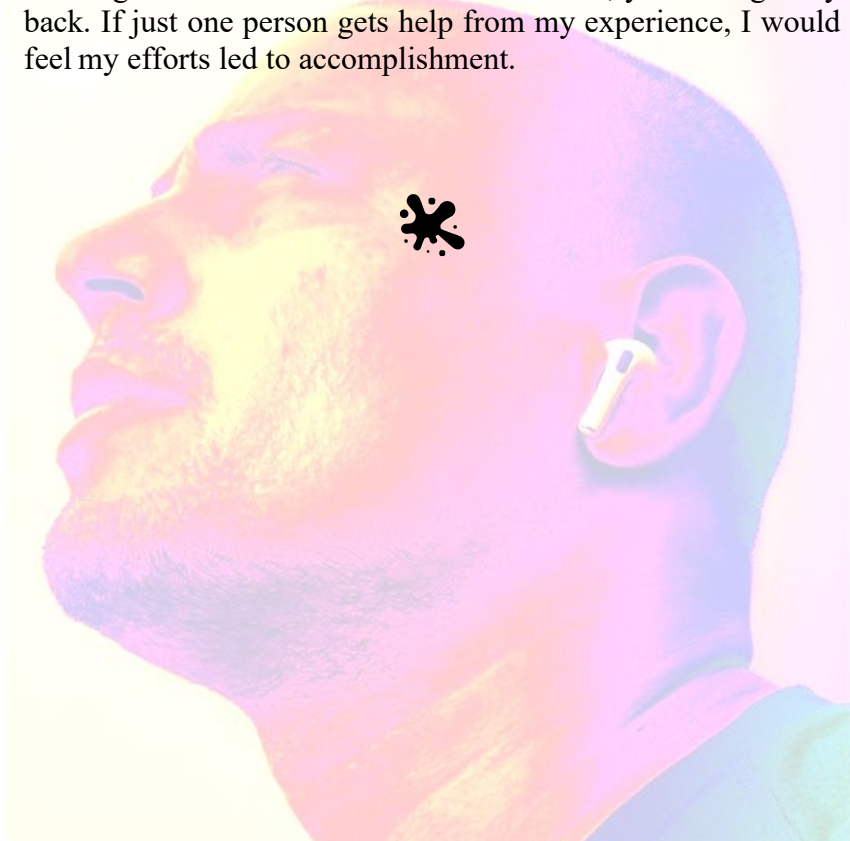
In the lonely summer of 2019, when the first thought of writing a book ran through my mind; I had passed so many lonesome hours to give up my lifeline just because I was so tired of combating tirelessly and wounded badly. There was no one who would pay attention to what I wanted to say, the people who I thought of my wolfpack had altered their DNA and had become vultures who would feed on anyone's vulnerability keeping their empathetic senses muted.

Sometimes I would use my imagination to keep my will strong and, at some time, I would find it difficult to figure out what am I and where am I sailing the boat of my life. I had my face wrinkled beneath the young skin and my mind had turned gray churning the colossal amount of anxiety. I would even feel rippled during the day and sinking to the bed of darkness of heavy clouds of pain. And, at the same time I would recall the obstacles which were already chased with a thought just one more at a time and happiness is on the other side, don't give up, just keep moving, I would tell myself; don't cry, move on, there is no one to give you the shoulder to cry and if you won't wipe your tears no one else would.

I couldn't stand and understand how my parents could leave their blood and flesh being irresponsible and even curse the presence of their children. Then I would think that maybe these are also the challenges for you, just get through it and happiness is just a few steps away and this way I traveled the journey from childhood to adulthood, this journey kept my mind sparked and then I decided to ignite some more vulnerable minds who need help and struggling as I have been, I was fortunate enough to learn early that I am on my own and no one else will ever come to rescue me, but I knew there are some other people who are in

more dense pain than me all they need a little bit of ignition, and they will emit lights on their path once sparked.

That's how I decided to share my journey with everyone out there struggling to be heard and expressed, I extend my arms wide to give a warm hug to each one who is/was/going or at the verge to be abandoned. You are not alone; you have got my back. If just one person gets help from my experience, I would feel my efforts led to accomplishment.





## FAR CRY

### HELPLESSNESS OF A CHILD



First of all, I would like to share a story of a baby who was born in Jammu and Kashmir, India almost three decades ago, on February 1, 1988, in the early morning of bone-chilling winters. And this little baby was securing an unforgettable memory to recognize what was happening to him.

As he recalls an incident that takes place on the edge of a highway which was no more than ten-twelve footsteps away under the dense shade of eucalyptus trees covering a small hut and a cowshed, as he progresses to grasp as much as view he could; all of a sudden he gets succumbed with a strong hand choking this lonely baby who is near the water tank probably reaching out to quench his thirst, and as he tries to drink water which leaking from the tap, this lost baby encounters a series of firm slaps from that heavy hand that draws a river of tears through the ponds of timid vision and this baby in chaos looks into the eyes of attacker and trying to recognize whose hand was that and why that tiny baby was being tortured; just because he was thirsty and looking for the water.

This horrifying incident is the only memory this baby could secure, and yet whenever he recalls that incident, he still gets

puzzled and unable to gather who poured those barrels of fear into his infant mind and hollowed his body draining the blood leaving the crawls under the skins and chilling the bones that easily got filled with the poisoning air that he inhaled of that person while struggling to memorize what happened to him.

There are some evidences which can't be discerned but felt; today's world runs on a piece of paper because trauma cannot be soaked up through objects; it is always cured after the state of mind is counseled with great care because the place where traumatic experiences have clogged is fragile and excruciating.

And this true story and all the experiences are mine; It was the first and clearly memorized far cry of my childhood. I still live at the same edge of highway, and it encircles my aura when I am asleep and it always haunts me now and then, but it makes me question a couple of things from that memory; who was he, and why did he do that to me?

Why there was no one around and why just that memory stored in that little brain, why there were no toys, why there were no claps, why there were no smiles, why there weren't so many people around, why the sun wasn't shining, why the rain didn't pour down to me, why no one stopped by to rescue me, why... why... why...?

This one why has made to write this book so that I can reach out to each one of you to help you to see what I couldn't see, maybe be this scene from the window will uncover the veiled darkness that hides somewhere among visibly innocent people yet with cruel souls.



## PAIR OF HEELS



Just a little while ago, I tried to show you the real picture through a window of my past and how it started to affect my innocent childhood. I was born through heartless parents, and it certainly was not my choice or fault. This realistic scenario was the very first sign of the fear of being responsible to raise the child and bearing the frustration to fulfill the needs.

What I am trying to bring out is that how unknowingly a clean cloth gets hard and further stained with bad blood and dries like a fall leaf and then how you shred it thread by thread; stepping onto the dried leaf and turning it into the dust because of your determination of getting separated just for your own comfort and wrong mind frame that babies cry because this is in their nature.

Now I am recollecting an agonizing memory that my mind had collected with blurred consciousness of a supporting shoulder and a compassionate hand on my back, sobbing, bruised, swollen eyes and the flow of shining pearl drops that blurs the vision. Where my body is trying to compensate; where nostrils are full of tears, tongue is short, vocal cord is giving up but there is an urge to cry; in the hope to be heard and expecting a



hug and kiss and a bit of water to feel the moisture to see if I am breathing.

And that shoulder is uncomfortably holding me and running somewhere far away from that scary highway where I can feel secure with that shoulder. I am loving the slight comfort and changing shoulders and damping the neck of my mother while she is trying to find the haven for us with a hope of that everything will be okay!

And, I remember that evening; we were commuting through traffic in the Jammu city as I am looking at the moon following us and I am so happy that moon is shining and when the passenger bus passes through a narrow road and the trees around where the moon hides itself for a while and I want to hook off from my mother's shoulder to check on another window where people are sitting and I remember falling down because of the kinetic energy and acceleration of the vehicle and my inability to understand the things and how this world runs, and then someone allows me to see the moon from his or her window and then all of a sudden the strong claws of my mother approaches my little arms to drag me back and inducing the fear of being lost or someone will take me away.

Later in the evening, I was holding my mother's right index finger, walking, jumping, and trying to match our footsteps; and sometimes getting ahead of her, and suddenly, she stares at me with an angry face and try to control me so that I don't get rolled over by vehicles passing by because a car just missed a hit. After walking around a mile and a half, we saw a building named "Caring Home"- a short stay home for women and children. And my mother warns me that we are getting in and if I showed any tantrums there, she would hit me, punish me, won't give me food and water, and will tell me to stand for hours.

facing the wall where I will not be allowed to look here and there.

And I clearly remember as we entered the “Caring Home”, we got into the building on the right side where there was a lot of mess of different kinds of things here and there and one bed where we were going to stay. In the short time mother made the adjustments and made the bed, I dozed off in no time. When I woke up, I saw here and there couldn’t find my mother and suddenly my sight halts near the bed on a wooden plank where a few jars full of cashews, almonds and walnuts were kept and I quickly jumped and opened the jars and started eating dry fruits.

And now my eyes were fully opened as I saw my mother; she was busy stacking clothes and placing things in different places. Meanwhile, I got a chance to move out, as I stepped out of the room, I see a large circular corridor that had an attractive floor made up of different pieces of marbles and granite which were installed in a way that seemed a Camouflage and I lost myself in there counting marbles, imagining animals and bird.

While I was enjoying counting the imaginary creatures, I saw a real army of ants and I started following the army of ants, and saw a mouse that quickly ran away and then I started getting excited to see rodents running here and there, hiding popping their heads, and I was so amused to see their little ears, the way they were biting things and getting scared, and their amazing tails. I couldn’t resist to stay back to enjoy and at the same time I was afraid what if one of these rodents bite me? It was the moment I had lost in wonderland; I started memorizing the names of the colors and keeping my feet on the marbles to make sure I step on the right colored marbles, walking round and round counting footsteps. Suddenly, I hear my name.

in a thunderous tone "Neeraj" come here, remember I had told you not to go out, what were you doing there?

And I couldn't utter a word, I got so scared and started trembling, that shout was so thunderous that my kidneys couldn't hold the fear for long, and I peed out there.

I had made a mistake playing in the corridor, enjoying myself, talking to myself, listening to myself and while sharing this, a thought comes into my mind if I were wise enough to know the consequences of the things, I did to amuse myself, I would not have been scolded for it, but it is past.

After I was scolded for my deeds, I was punished there almost for one or two hours; can't exactly remember but I am sure it was a long wall-facing because the pain in the knees that I felt at that time still comes back to me through my memory reserves when I see any child being scolded or getting a slap, and then a feeling moistens my eyes that If someone would have actually cared would have hugged me and said sorry that she didn't mean to hurt me, she was angry and scared, but I remember her making efforts to make me civilized from her perspective. And to be very honest, I don't remember if I was ever hugged after that or not.

She probably wanted me not to make any mistake, from her perspective I should have become a child who acts like a grown-up man but not as a child. The conditions, the ways of setting up, her various trials to keep her own agitated and scared mind off the hook, her desires to feel the relaxation, maybe she was tired of running, saving me, saving herself from everyone, maybe there were predators in her mind, or she was not courageous enough to fight for herself, maybe I was a burden.

to hold on and carry for a longer period, maybe she did not know how to raise a child, maybe she was regretting to have me born, maybe she did not know how a child feels, maybe she wasn't aware of what a childhood feels like, maybe she was never loved by her parents, maybe she wanted me to grow up before my age and maybe she forgot that I once lived in her womb, maybe the situations change humans' mind, or sometimes in the tempest of thoughts, worries and feelings; mothers forget that they are more than that; is that pain of living and keeping your child with you feels more excruciating than the pain when you give a birth to an infant.

### *Suggestions:*

*I would like to request every single parent who has decided to and conspiring to getting a divorce when their children are in fact children. I urge you to please pay attention toward the emotional well-being of your kids and do not move on without taking your children's welfare into the consideration. Because of what I have gone through, I would never want it to happen to any child in this world.*

*Why do I want to reach every parent when I couldn't ask my parents these questions? I couldn't ask questions to my parents because I was a child and after getting through what I have gone through, I would like to be with every child whose childhood is in danger or at the verge to be abandoned, I am trying to be the voice of your children who have no idea what is going to happen to their lives once their parents will decide to move on.*

*Dear parents before you decide to move on, I want you to ask these questions from your inner self just now before you are*



*making your next moves, make sure your children don't ask you the same questions that I wanted to ask my parents now and I know my questions are never going to be answered... it is too late for them to answer my questions because the damage was done, and it can't be healed.*

- *Have you made any arrangements where your children won't feel the emotional pain?*
- *Why would you give up on your children and selfishly decide to move on?*
- *Why wouldn't you fight with the circumstance to make sure your children have the parent's love?*
- *Would you be kind enough to learn a lesson from a bitch (female dog) who never leaves her pups, no matter what happens?*

*Before you are scaring your children with the divorce demon, please try to listen to what they want to say and aren't getting words to say; learn from the tears of your children, they are not merely crying, screaming and fighting with you; they are trying to gain your attention that they need you; you matter world to them; they trust you; they see you friendly that they are brave enough to make any mistake that easily can be discerned.*

*Their mistakes are your hard work that they are telling you that they are growing up, they are crying but they are trying, their tears want your soft hands before it touches their cheeks, their sobbing needs your chest, their shoulders need your arms around them, they are reminding you that you have given birth to them; they are your own.*



*And think for a while of a time when a baby is born the first connection is made with the mother and when newly born baby is kept on mothers' heart where that baby listens to the heart beat and when it matches with the heartbeat when that baby was inside the womb, baby stops crying, baby trusts the body where he/she is getting milk from, a life enriching bond is made, after going through all of this, how would you and could you desert your children for your own comfort and why?*

And, next day I remember, I was getting ready to go to the school, and I was excited but hungry, just a couple of minutes before heading to the school, my mother attaches the handkerchief with a safety pin on the pocket of my shirt and guides me how to clean your nose. And I copied her right way and showed it that I have learned to use a handkerchief, and she smiles and walks me to the school which was a few minutes of round- walking distance in the East.

I don't remember the name of the school but It was either a primary or middle school, I can tell you that because I remember a lot of kids were of my height and some were taller than me. There are very few memories I could collect from my past, no one told me about my past in detail, I don't have pictures of my childhood either, so whatever I am sharing with you is the maximum I could extract from the reservoir of my mind.

I could easily bend down and see through the gate if any street food vendors were passing by during the recess, and I also knew that I could only see the street food vendors and won't be able to buy anything, but I would bravely look at the actions of the vendors viz. *Chole- Kulche wala, Golgappe-wala, Kulfi-wala,*

*Malai-wala and buddhi-ke-baal- wala.* I still remember a funny incident of my school days I was asking for eatable from either of the above-mentioned street-food vendors and he asked for money and I told him I don't have money but I am hungry, he said he doesn't give or sell anything if there is no money, at that time I was not aware of the value of the money, since that day I started disliking that vendor and I would never be in front of him anymore, but I kept trying with other vendors because I used to feel hungry during recess because all of my class fellows would purchase things and I would stand in the corner of a gate and discern the hand movements of the vendors that how do they prepare eatables, especially their eyes the way they focus on the eatables and the speed how quickly they will sell and then looking at their faces while charging money from the students and attending new customers, sometimes coins used to get slipped from their hands and I used to watch the rolling or flipping coins onto the road and feeling happy with the sounds of the coins and how it gets rolled down and it kept happening and it happened all the time until my school was changed.

I wonder why there is no memory of teachers, or my class-fellows, I don't even remember anyone's name from that school, But I remember the gate, the grill, the banyan tree, desks, black boards, and its stands.

I remember once I fell down in the drain that was wide enough to gulp me and deep enough to hide me; the school timing was over, parents used to pick their children up and my mother also used to come to pick me up and I remember she used to ask me on the ways that now you know what road leads to where, don't you? I used to say yes now I know, and she would tell me: now you can also come on your own, and you can do it and I used to say yes.

And one day that deep drain gulped me and unfortunately she did not come to pick me up from the school gate; the day I fell down into the drain and I was all alone and scared that someone would kidnap me and sell me, as there used to be so many instances of child-kidnapping those days and my mother had already induced that fear in me and so I was watching the drain water flowing especially the centripetal pattern and walking remembering the things I used to see every day and matching those things to make sure that leading path right, and I stumbled upon and fell into the drain and started crying but then a fear of being punished if my mother got aware of the incident was more scary than the pain I was feeling, and then I checked my knee and calf, right knee-skin was peeled off, some part of the left thigh was badly bruised, I wanted to scream and cry because the intensity of the pain was unbearable, but I chose not to cry loudly but sobbing badly, eyes were full of tears, nose was running, my elbows were also bruised, and trying to walk straight so that my mother would not know anything that happened to me.

A few days later I got sick with whooping cough that I didn't want to go to the school, neither I was in a position to stand up and walk comfortably, then my mother got me some medicine from the Red Cross Laboratory where she used to work as Lab Assistant, those medicines were in both liquid and solid form; I can easily recall the color of the pill was white and intensely bitter, one syrup was bitter and another was sweet and taking those medicines was not even an easy choice for me, I used to resist taking bitter medicine and my mother used to snip the big white pill into half and crushing in the spoon making white bitter pool of syrup that I was supposed to gulp in a go and sometimes I used to be successful and sometimes I failed, but when I failed the attempt to intake medicine which was bitter,

she knew how to control me, she exactly knew how to hold me still, what length of my hair should be tightened to pull up so that my scalp get hurt, get my head in control so that her tight slap never go in vain or miss the spot she wanted to hit and making unable to resist taking bitter medicine If I somehow swallowed the medicine in a fear but my body would never listen to me, I always wanted to run away and open myself with all the stress. I was being fed by her deliberately or unknowingly, maybe she didn't know that pressure creates resistance but fear always suppressed my emotions, clamped down my wings and chained my ankles leaving me helpless and dependent on my fate. I know how it exactly feels living in any type of fear, how your breathing slows down, you cannot swallow your own saliva, your eyes dry out the tears, your heart bleeds, your soul screams but no one can hear you because soul doesn't make a noise of sobbing and screaming, it is like someone screaming trapped into the infinite depth where nothing is audible to anyone sitting at the peak of that hollowness that much distance your body gets in with your soul, soul wants to leave but your body resists.

And, when my soul wanted to leave my body I felt dizzy and wanted to get better, wanted to live, wanted to run, wanted to jump, wanted to eat, wanted to see the market, wanted to see all the street food vendors again, wanted to be with my fellows, wanted to measure my height standing next to my classmates and comparing heights, wanted to walk on the dried leaves of the Banyan tree so that I can listen to the sound of walking, wanted to see parents of other kids, wanted my mother to drop and pick me up from the school, wanted to count the stars, wanted to count the stripes of color on a Government Building that was near my school, wanted to see horse cart and getting shocked while comparing a dog with a cow or horse.



I wanted to get up from that bed but never wanted to take that bitter medicine again, so I got a chance, as my mother left me in that building where we were staying temporarily, I woke up and found myself alone and that feeling of being free energized my senses; I thought now no one will force me to have bitter medicine and that dark bottle of sweet cough syrup was sitting there in the corner lined up to the one leg of the bed; as it was telling me I am ready to get in your system, I smelled the bottle, captured the taste and drank it all and fallen asleep in peace that I am going to enjoy this syrup.

Later in the evening I found myself on a white-painted bed that had a white bedsheet on and a red blanket on my legs while two people were talking to each other as I opened my eyes, they stopped talking and either of them asked me if I wanted to have some water, fruit or ice-cream, I said I wanted ice-cream and they said doctor won't allow it as I was going through intravenous therapy. But I wanted to get up and move, both of them slowed me down and firmly told me that don't move, or you will bleed, and I started crying because I was feeling uncomfortable in a new atmosphere, a lot of white tube lights and yellow light of bulbs and then the worried faces of my mother and his brother. I remember my mother crying near my feet and her brother waving my hair and running his palm on my forehead and I did not know why she was crying, and then she sobbed and said if something would have had happened to you, I did not understand because I had never known about death and life.

And I don't remember when and how I get out of the hospital, next thing I know that mother stayed with me and kept me under her supervision or always tried to keep me busy with homework inducing the greed of having something I looked and desired to have. She would tell me if you would grace in your



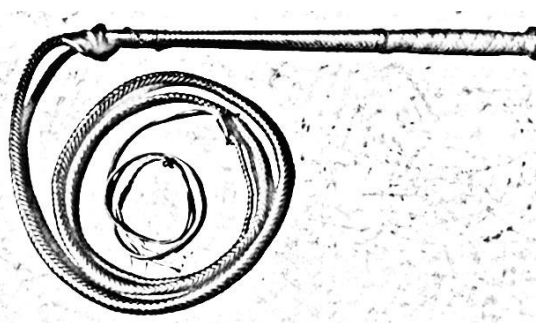
academic results, I will get you that three-tire bicycle that I used to see hanging in the front of a tire-shop. I remember it strongly because of that strong desire to ride a bicycle that had a blue seat, black handle, and black hard plastic tires. Every time I passed by that shop where it was hung, I happily stared at it from the distance of a blurred vision to the distance of getting away until it gets blurred again.

And, I would always tell my mom, I would get it because I was working hard, I was studying, remembering things, following rules, paying attention to all the condition which was being induced in me, I would say yes to everything, I nodded yes to all the things she asked for; eat whatever is given to you, go where you are taken to, stay where you are told to, do the homework on time, place your utensils after eating near the tap, swoosh-out the water through mouth after you finished eating, I started learning and following this quickly because of that greed, and as the matter of fact I excelled in my class gotten good grades and I was so happy that I would get my gift on my result as the adrenaline rush surged in me I got so determined to get that bicycle and then she said behave yourself, I don't have money right now when you will pass the Eighth grade then I will gift you even more beautiful bicycle and somewhere that lingering notions left me confused because I was not even a fully grown child and after that I started behaving like a grown-up person, and very soon my inner child was killed so sweetly ~ I still don't understand what to call it Embracing a childhood or an aesthetic-murder of the childhood.

And it was the last moment when that murdered- childhood trailed that pair of heels ever.



## WHIP-CRACKING



After trailing the footsteps, now it was another season with all its divisions; my life had Sprung in the commencement of a strange and new lonesome life without my mother's shadow, Soon it was the time for summer to close one more chamber of my childhood and my emotions started leaving its stems like the fall leaves of the withering plant and then the feeling of being ripped off as buds were nipped off in the front of that bone-chilling Winter and I had no other choice to face these seasons alone by myself.

After all this, my mother decided to leave me in an orphanage where I never wanted to be alone. I still remember me screaming for mother's presence, her love and then not wanting to hook off from her chest but I don't know though she was so courageous to snip the thread as once the placenta cut off, she must have screamed during my birth, but this time this snip was not painful to her at all. I wondered if she was under the influence of freedom or having me as a burden. She told me to not to follow her as she promised to come back after a few days; was it a scoop of ice cream or worldly candy to suppress my scream or to freeze my tears. I don't exactly remember

exactly what, but I remember that blurred vision of what she wanted to do; she wanted me to understand that she is either frustrated, scared to have no choice but to desert me.

I remember how loudly I had screamed that please don't leave me; I don't want to stay without you. I remember she lied to me by saying that stay there some time and I will take you away from here. She probably had kissed me goodbye, I couldn't crystal the vision through the densely luminous wall of tears as my hands were busy damping the knuckles and arms wiping the nostrils and I was short of breath because of the string of my heart and soul was being pulled firmly and it waved so strongly that when I raised my head up, I could see myself and not anyone else.

That feeling of being lonely was like someone dropped you in the hollow well from the peak of the mountain and you are sinking down to the bottomless well.

I knew she had deserted me, and that stage was worse than a shot of Hunter's Whip-cracking. Now while I am sharing this moment, I wish she had stayed there for a longer time or would have had wiped my tears, waved her fingers through my hair to hug me and kissed me to say that I am here; I wish at least she could have lied to me to calm down the storm in me. How come she couldn't shed a tear, extend her arms, why her lips were so disliking my forehead?

Every-why is, was, and always will be so painful for the last breath of me because of the child that was murdered a long time ago is still breathing critically and the child in me still wants to conclude his journey through the time he was choked up to death; no matter how hard I try to convince the child in me, he

is so stubborn, so demanding, so lively and humble that he tells me that please either convince me that I never existed if I did, then what was my fault that I was punished to live like I lived, why was I forced to act as a grown-up? And I tell him that it happened to you because you meant to be strong, and I still don't get my answers that why she wasn't strong and courageous enough to hold me? Why I was heavy to be thrown out her heart?

I wish she could have tried to pull me back to her arms to hold me tight, to give me a warm hug, I wish when she dropped me off her shoulders and, when I was swimming in her hands to climb back to her shoulders, she could have cared enough to sit down to calm me. I wasn't forcing her to buy me candy, buy me ice cream, buy me a car, or buy me a bicycle.

Every time I think of her I always question myself; Why did she fail me to win her heart? Why she paralyzed my childhood that never stayed hushed? If I were aware of God and his existence that time; I wouldn't have missed begging my mother that I needed her, if she had made me a one more fake promise I wouldn't have been left alone, I would have passed that promise as a desire; a desire of being a child again.



# FORSAKING

## DESERT



After I was abandoned alone in an orphanage that night I was unable to sleep because I was sobbing, I didn't feel happy at all that night it was like I was afraid of my own shadow now; I was peeking out of my bed and was looking here and there, total silence and a lot of windows, a lot of beds, a lot of other children sleeping, all lights were turned off, I was curled up with my elbows and knees tucked because I was scared; I didn't have motherly arms; I was peace- less, breathing fast and exploring what did I do to deserve all this, and somewhere in the window the moonlight was calling me to say that I am with you, I actually left my bed and went near the window to see the moon shining. While I was enjoying looking at the moon, I heard the sound of footsteps getting closer and closer. I touched my cheek with the window glass and saw a man coming near the window; he saw me and hidden myself down to the window.



he said in a firm voice go to sleep; he was the watchman who was on duty.

I got scared as it was dark and he came so close to the window trying to see my face with his both palms facing flat on the window grills; I stepped back trying to hide myself from his surveillance and quickly jumped into my bed and after that I couldn't sleep but finally dozed off crying; I wished and praying that I could get free soon from that place because I was feeling lonely and on top of that my mother had thrown me in there. She had gone without leaving a trace, without giving me a clue or I would have followed those footsteps to trail the path we had entered; I wanted to run away; wanted to escape.

I had grown up strongly understanding that I was able to go and come back from my school where I had fallen into the drain. Even at that moment I used to think, If I had wings, I would fly with the moon because that shiny and smiling moon was always with me, I remember traveling through passenger buses and those windows where I used to see the moon following me; I was so innocent that I didn't even know the distance between me and the moon. The Moon was my best friend now because it would come out every night and pour light through the windows, especially its calmed nature and silenced comfort had made me fallen for it.

But sometimes, the moon wouldn't come at night in the same window and then I would walk barefoot without making noise in the room and roam around beds to check other windows and when I could see the moon through another window, I would feel happy.

And Now, Minutes, Seconds, hours, Days, weeks, and months had gone by, now the moon, the sun and birds were getting.

well along with me as I had developed a healthy communication with nature. I used to feel so uncomfortable, firstly missing my mother and secondly a lot of other children; I was timid, I would always keep my chin to my chest and focus on the ground scared. The discipline was a new word to me, every child there was supposed to be following the discipline, but I used to feel so uneasy that it started seeming like a blackjack weapon to me, I learned to adhere a set of rules cautiously or be ready for punishments which would be standing barefoot on the concrete floor in the sun in the peak sunny days, or skimming by a pomegranate branch without its leaves on.

Gradually, I started learning to cope with the harsh punishments on the sunny days when the sun was at its peak. I somewhat disliked the sun because its rising was the commencement of the orders to complete the different tasks; like collecting dried leaves and gathering garbage from one heap to another and throwing it to the dumping zone. I remember once, while throwing garbage I was stung by the scorpion but I don't remember now which leg was it, but it swollen so badly like my thigh had shifted down to my leg. I remember, someone from the orphanage brought a bowl full of milk and told me to put my foot in the bowl which was full of milk to check whether I was stung or not.

Right after examining the sting, I was taken to the hospital; I remember me getting dizzy. And next thing I know I was treated compassionately, and the nurse sweetly given me the shot while the doctor kept me busy asking my name and how beautiful little boy I was, while answering what was my name, they would say wow, he talks well, but somewhere down deep, I was so scared because of the yelling and scolding I had faced before I

was taken to the hospital; I remember someone slapped me because I was barefoot, If I would scream after being hit, and then If I would express the pain crying loudly and then I would get a series of slaps until I stopped screaming and crying.

Later, my psyche probably understood it crystal clear that there is no one who will come to save me from the situation I was in, no one will ever listen to what I wanted to say, No one will ever pay attention and try to understand what I was expressing. I was a child and children say anything sometime, elders don't have any idea what the kids are talking about, so they don't pay much attention.

I was growing up ahead of time than my actual age and however the lonely child inside me was dying every moment passing by and I was gaining the momentum and nicely driven by the word discipline; I was controlling myself so that I don't look weak and vulnerable and matter of the fact I was doing good with the discipline because I had understood that adapting the discipline is the only way out of the torture and always do as you are told to, walk on the lines or blackjack weapon and the branches of pomegranate tree were plenty to guide me.

And whenever I ever happened to nearby the pomegranate trees, I would always find a way to run away from that tree as soon as possible before someone sees me around those trees in a fear of being hit by it, but I remember the softness of its lovely red flowers but not the branches through which I used to get punished often.

A few days passed by, and I was being polished by the learning and following their guidelines and gradually; I found that my brother was already there; he was living in a different

dormitory so everything happened so spontaneously that it took me some hours to meet him there, as he was enrolled before me. I didn't know anything about my brother until I found him in the orphanage; he was already mixed up with the children and I was trying to get gelled with one another to keep myself happy and I also started participating in running, walking, playing games and the routines chores and instructions of the orphanage; and now my life was being configured, totally in a new way, a long life of years and years of learning.

I had to stay there because my life was passing through a dangerous zone of my life and no way out, sometimes when I used to out-speak that I want to get out from the orphanage because, some people operating the facility were so merciless that they had beaten me with pomegranate branches and eucalyptus sticks, those red long red scars used to hurt a lot and finally I learned to live with the pain because a time came when I wouldn't care for the sticks or branches because getting hit or punished was a regular thing and on top of that no one would come there to see and save me, so why to cry, just live with it, that is what I learned during that time of living there.

I had no idea I would be beaten so badly to try to find an escape, but I tried because I had seen a few elder boys ran away and freed them successfully. I was a child and was not able to run farther as those guys were teenagers and they made their ways; I remember two boys who managed to find the escape; they were twins.

After a few years I was again now in the center of everyone's attention, not making attempts to run away; because of my brain; I was excelling in every way whether it was playing games, getting excellent grades in study, creating laughter.



being a comedian, singing movie songs and everyone was paying attention to me because I was extraordinarily growing older than my real age.

I was in probably third or fourth grade but I was being put before other senior fellows as an example whose learning capacity was low; I learned A to Z, 1 to 100 in words and reverse, Names of days in a week, names of the months in a year, I had become a favorite student of all teachers in the Primary School, where one teacher started treated me as her child and she would bring me sweets, lunch and would take care of me; I felt so special. All the warmth and attention made me more confident and as a result now I started loving being in the school than in the orphanage and I would never let my teacher's expectations down; I would always work hard that helped me to get excellency in every teacher's respective subject. Very quickly I became the brightest student at my school, and Now I was being introduced as an intelligent illustration to the students of eighth grade as I was in merely fourth grade.

One day my favorite teacher who used to treat me as her child was transferred to some other school as she was a government teacher; as I came to know about her transfer, I got so upset that I won't be able to receive her warmth and attention, no one would hug me, no one would ask me how was I feeling, no one would understand me, all of those innocent thoughts started swirling my head, I did not understand that how can a teacher leave me like this, I always wanted that teacher to be with me, I started crying and somehow she persuaded me that she is going to teach in some other school but she will come to visit me. And then she told the other teachers to inform her how was I doing, when she left the school, she gave me a lot of sweet candies.



After my motherly teacher was transferred to another school, her friend who was also a teacher started taking care of me and she indeed took a great care of me, she would tell me that if I would study hard and secure good grades, she will come to see me. And sometimes my motherly teacher would visit to see me during the recess or in the principal's office. I still remember when motherly teacher came to see, she told me what she heard from her teacher friend that I cried so heavily missing her that I would not put efforts to study, I wouldn't do the homework on time and teachers won't scold me even for a bit, because they knew that I was from the orphanage and they would pamper me and put all their efforts to encourage me to get up and do the homework.

After an immediate emotional breakdown, my grades were remarkably lowering now as I was losing interest in the study because I was starving for love and lack of warmth. Later, the orphanage people came to know of my low performance and the reason behind, and because of this emotional wreckage, my school was changed.

And in the new academic session I was now enrolled in the new School which was situated a few miles out of town in the posh area of Jammu city east of Gandhi Nagar. And, this changing of the school seemed intriguing to me because I was being dropped and picked up in the orphanage's school van and it was the first exciting instance for me to sit in the van, when the glasses of the van would be shut, there would be no outside noise and I would get so excited to feel the change and I used to tell the driver that please start the car and he would smile and say stay quiet and I would enjoy the traveling. It was kind of new environment and I liked it, when I would travel through roads, I would see a lot of people and whenever I would see any

female, I would like to pay attention to see if she was my motherly teacher and unfortunately, I never saw her again.

Now getting a ride in the school van was the thrilling experience that how a van would take me to the school and now I started liking the Sun because I would travel in that van in the rear seat near the window, I would see other people, other kids some of my age and some elder than me and of course younger ones too. I would wave them as a gesture to say hello and they would wave me back and I would get so much excited every time someone would wave back, I felt so happy that person on the other side would reply my wave and sometimes some people would smile and I would give a scared smile that what if I get caught smiling, maybe I would get punished because I was interacting with other people?

And, one day when I returned from school, it was the lunchtime and I was called in the Orphanage Office and I got scared, don't know what I do wrong now. And as I got in the office, there I saw my mother and I ran up happily to hug her and I started crying and requesting; please mother take me away from here, please take me away I don't want to live here, these people hit me, slap me, and I showed my bean sized signs of pomegranate branches on my skin and people who were there in the offices lied to my mother and said he was fallen or fighting with some kids, so we slapped him.

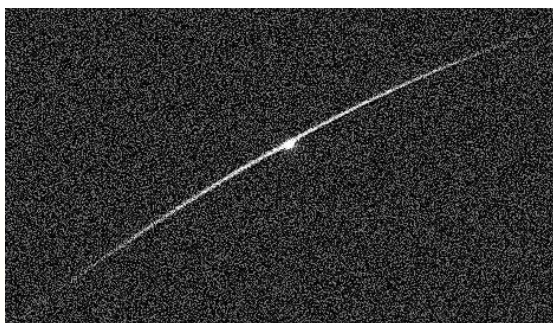
And my mother regarded the statements made by orphanage people; whatever they explained to her, even after seeing the marks on my skin, she didn't even yell or scream, maybe she was scared that if she would, they will hand over me to her what she never wanted. Further, she was allowed to meet me for ten minutes because it was in their instructions that they don't allow guardian or parent to meet for longer a time because that

would ruin their efforts shaping a child's future and develop the bond which will become hard for the orphanage people to mold it in their way, and I was not aware of the design of their rules I was a child I wanted my mother back; I wanted her to take me away. I crumbled as my mother was leaving and I ran to catch her and, then I was held strongly from behind by someone and then I pushed the person away by biting his arm and approached to my mother's arms and she given me in the hands of orphanage, and she probably said that she would come back.

After she left me this time, she cut the cord that had kept me waiting for her. Now she failed my expectations with her inability to see inside me. She made me feel different this time; I did not want to meet her again I was so upset and shattered with this incident that I never wanted to see her face; she failed me this time and every time with all of her unwillingly vague promises and this is how I lost confidence in her and the thread of trust was snapped; I still couldn't understand whether the thread was weak, or the cut was sharp enough, but whatever happened it broken the emotional and loving bond between a mother and a child. I wish she had understood or prioritized her motherhood or my childhood; I wish she would have had gone a bit serious about her or my life or our lives; Our was split into Oh! Yours, no matter how many times, how many words I cross or assemble I would never be able to express the pain into words, they say profound emotions can only be felt not fully expressed. And I learned that I am the only one who can help me to escape from there and that was only possible when I would be grown up and educated; I took the education my closest rope while sinking in the river of tears while getting deaf and listening to my own heart palpitations.



## PREVAILING



At this stage, I was learning the key skills of survival that would help me in near future if I got into some kind of trouble; the force within me was rising with hard-hit lessons. In all this time, I did not know how to react to the situations I have been put to face, but my mind and body started altering and learning to keep me immune to the dreadful consequences which I had to come across even though it wasn't my fault.

Well, fortunately I fell in love with education so profoundly and I could feel rising above myself in all the aspects of my growth; I was literally getting older than younger I was, surprisingly I was performing well in studies and getting good grades, and very soon, I was the rising star in every format of the orphanage and the school. By excelling and performing outstandingly soon I became the center of everyone's attention.

At times, there were small gatherings, organized by the rich people of the Jammu city, who used to donate essential items. Especially when eatables used to get distributed among children, all the children would stand in a queue and the people who were donating things, they would smile and say, "Hello! What's your name?" and everyone would reply, and they will say very good or nice and give us apples, oranges, biscuits,



chocolates, slippers and so many items. We would gather it, without even realizing the difference between give and take.

We were instructed to say thank you when someone gives you something because doing that way, they would feel good and respected. And, we were always under the supervision of the orphanage staff watching over us when things used to get distributed among children, and the orphanage staff would always remember who said thank you and who did not on the attendance register, and later on the one who did not say thank you will be punished with slaps and sticks; a person from the orphanage who was working as a watchman would hit us so hard and induce the fear in us of behaving as we were instructed.

But the core feeling was, we were among those who had never seen big apples, sweet oranges, crispy biscuits, and gooey chocolates, we would hold those things in our hands and look at each other's faces and compare the sizes of eatables and we would feel so happy if one gets a bigger size of apple than other, sweeter than bitter, crunchy than dusted or however and whatever we used to find pleasure in anything.

I would always eat apple slowly because it used to look so red and juicy, I would bite the apple opening my mouth as much as wide-opened, and after seeing the distance of upper and lower teeth line of the bite on the apple, I would tell other fellows; "see the size of my bite?" And all of them would say wow, and they will try the same. And it used to be an accomplishment in our little world to find the happiness in anything, in whatever way we could cheer up ourselves.

And it was not just the apple; I would always count the segments of the orange and will compare the numbers and



sizes with other children's oranges; I would look so closely into the pulp and feel-good peeling the zest for the pulp and this pith- threads like veins around it. And I also found out that how a dried zest causes sensitivity to eye if it gets crushed near the eyes, I found it shockingly funny because sensitivity caused by the chemical in the zest which wouldn't last more than a few seconds.

Since I had discovered this daring fact that how long one can bear the irritation in the eyes; So, I decided to do the practical with to my competitor in the study and we ended up fighting with each other and that is how I started getting naughty. I was growing up with the changes in behavior, and now I was intelligent and naughty at the same time, So I started using my intelligence over my naughty behavior, I started trading it with whatever I did because I wanted to enjoy my life; I wanted to feel lively and did not want to get punished.

And you would like to know, how did I do it? Just one line down...

At a very young age I managed to store things in my little brain, I was good at memorizing things like remembering numbers, places of the objects, patterns, designs, and lyrics. I had learned to sing "Jana Gana Mana" an Indian National Anthem and I could sing it loudly and clearly with proper pronunciations and intonations. And not just this, in fact, all the mantras that used to be chanted before the meals and evening prayers. My learning capacity was increasing day by day by day, while writing this I am smiling and astounded now, how come I was so sharp? Well, I used to remember everyone's name as there were around sixty fellows with me, I would remember, how many trees, of what kinds were there in the garden, I would sharply remember how many flowers are blooming and

who picked which flower and who harmed the plant, I would count stair-steps, I would count chairs, tables, a pair of slippers and shoes and would guess how many people are in the common hall where we used to watch television.

Although children below some specific ages were not allowed to watch television and gaining access to the television room wasn't an easy task. Now I had passed eight class and was marginally eligible to get access to the television room. Finally, I managed to get the common hall as I would not be permitted to go inside but stand at the door with one foot across and behind the threshold and would watch television from there and elder fellows would tell me go, go-away you are not allowed to watch and I would tell them, I would share my biscuit with you if you stay quiet, or I would not slap you if you don't remember the correct order of months, weekdays, I would act slapping you, they knew I was sharp with education, so they would let me stand and watch the television and that's how started trading my ways to get what I wanted and that was a sort of accomplishment to me.

Years went by, and now I was totally set up with the ambiance, my world was shrunk. I was falling for my world of happiness, and I liked it until I came in contact with the outer world.

One day a singing competition was organized by our orphanage, and I was selected to perform in front of so many people who had come from the Jammu city to attend a function. This function was being organized in respect to welcome some high-ranked officers who were coming there for donations. And how things were supposed to be scheduled; people who would come there, they would interact with every child, they would ask everyone's name and what do they like and dislike, and we were already rehearsed that way so that we

don't make any mistake to cause any embarrassment to the people of the orphanage in any way.

That was the way how it was programmed, and we were told to behave properly and only reply what is asked specifically. We were instructed and made aware of the steps of the program and how long would it last; first the guests would have tea and then they will ask about our names and what do we like and then they would donate something, and then we would perform some activities such as singing, drawing and funny news-reading competitions, these were the ways to entertain donators and by that time they would sign some checks and ask about the number of children, and rising requirements during respective seasons.

The donators would shake hands with us, they would ask our name and tell us to look up so they can see our faces, we would be so scared, shy, hurt, and innocent, we didn't know if raising our heads will lead us to a punishment, because some instances had happened and we have literally seen a child even myself being beaten in front of everyone after the donators were gone with sticks, kicks, pomegranate branches, bamboo sticks, and all of us would stand scared and holding our breath what if next one is me or someone else, we would see down to the ground, until our names are called, I would hold my breath and stay still that I am not making any movement, and you never know who is next! And being in that fear I used to think, If I had my parents I wouldn't be here, they would never put me in here, but the reality was something else.



## SEND OFF



Finally, the time had come when I was going to see the outside world, here I would share how I was able to see outside the gate, this gate was where I had cried and begged my mother to take me with her and she couldn't, and it was going to be on my own.

Just a few more days and I was all set to be launched into the outer sphere from a long-dwelled kiln. Now I was well equipped, yet being a thoughtful adolescent, I had learned almost all the aspects to survive in every kind of environment.

There was still some more time for me to stay in the orphanage, to learn and explore more about life and enhance what I had learned so far. And then I met a man who changed my thought process and tried his best to ease my pain with his wisdom and helped me to explore more about my inner side; I know him as a Godfather; he went beyond my expectations and understood me on a subtler level and did his best whatever he could have done for me. His name was K.K. Hajura, a retired Chief Education Officer who had recently joined this organization to support and transform the lives of all the children who were in the orphanage.



His presence was so effective that he communicated with every one of us and literally made notes on a diary and written every single child's statement whatever he asked. It was my turn to interact with him; he asked my name, and I replied, "My name is Neeraj," and then he smilingly asked me, do you know what does your name mean? And, I hesitantly replied no, and he explained to me the meaning of my Name; he told me that you are a beautiful Lotus, and you will bloom so big one day and writing this sentence watered my eyes.

If he was alive today, he would be so proud of me and maybe a little hurt too because the marshy field that kept me blooming beneath has dried up combating so long with the heat of challenges. Even though I was withering, but I never decided to give up. The divine force inside me kept me alive and guided me not to let anyone down whoever supported you in your life. And I decided to stand firm, fought for my existence, healed the injuries, recovered, and stood firm again and again instead of giving up.

Godfather suggested me to stay consistent and to hold the moment; there was only one thing I could have accomplished something good that was my academic record. I had a consistent rapport to secure top ranking as roll no. 1 because roll numbers used to be assigned based on educational performance, i.e., because of scoring good marks. In May 2003, I graduated 10th standard from Jain high school Jammu; it was the usual day after examinations in the anticipation of the result. I used to stay nervous and lazy to know the final outcome, I would check newspapers every day to see if my result was declared yet or not and then it went on; days after days and the apprehension level was increasing, as my fellows used to talk about, how you have a few days left and soon you would be free and they would get so serious because the fire of



getting out from there was as same as mine. And I remember how I used to discuss that, don't worry we will meet again, and we used to talk like; someday, somewhere, we will again meet and cherish our times and we would talk about we meeting after becoming grandparents, it used to be fun all the time to talk about getting escaped and how free and beautiful the world will be after the declaration of final result.

Next thing I know, it was a hot Sunday morning when I was lying on the concrete border around the huge banyan tree; I had my chin placed on the stack of my hands, lying on my stomach and watching the army of ants passing through a recently fallen yellow-green leaf; I was watching how those ants were using their tentacles to find their path, and it was a beautiful scene under the shade of that banyan tree.

And suddenly Godfather came and gently pulled my messy hair and said what are you doing with this nest of your head? I got conscious and got up and finally stood up to show him respect and I touched his feet and wished him good morning. Then he called all the children who were playing around in the dormitories. Within a few minutes everyone was gathered, and I was sort of confused that what did I do?

Godfather said, Neeraj, come here and as I neared the steps he hugged me, and patted my back and said, "I am proud of you Neeraj, Congratulations." And I started crying with happiness and all of that sincere hug and pat on my back made me realized that I had done a good job, all the children applauded for my success. I was the First candidate to score 68% in that orphanage; it was a special moment for me because I had worked hard to get through by self-studying. Soon, more children were gathered, and everyone was told to say, "Congratulations Neeraj" in one voice loudly and I felt so special

and then I was told to distribute the sweets, and all the boys and girls wished me with smiling faces.

And, deep down in my heart, I was so excited that I have finally graduated 10th Standard that means now I would be eligible to move out from this orphanage. And as the time was nearing, I had already developed a strong connection with the orphanage, and all the attention I was getting from everyone, everyone was respecting me for my success and making me feel special and little kids would see me as an inspiration. And I used to tell them how to study, wake up early in the morning and study at late night to get the maximum when there is silence.

Later, it was announced that the candidates who have graduated 10th standard would be sent back home. Get your belongings ready and figure out everything to handover things in possession before moving out. Feeling of getting freedom was like; a bird getting out of the cage after an extensive time period and I was feeling that I would be ultimately free where I can sleep as much as I want, I can eat whenever I want, I can play out whenever I want, I can live happily and no more harsh punishments, no more sticks, no more kicks, no more slaps, no more scolding, no more tears, no more unhappiness. And, at the same time the fear of losing friends and people with whom I had spent my childhood, but the happiness of being free was higher than the losing friends, I was naïve that I did not know how the world was outside, that fence where I had lived was the world to me and because of the boundaries and limits I was feeling stuck and left out.

After the announcement, candidates who have graduated 10th Standard soon would be sent home, all juniors, and other children who used to feel the same as I used to feel, in fact

every child had the same feeling of getting free, juniors would come and sit near the students who had recently graduated and would ask about the plans after getting out, and they would express their sadness that they also wanted to get out and they would get so emotional and count their years to go on fingers, how many years have passed by and how many more are left, And, we used to tell each other that no matter what we will always be in touch, I would tell them, once I am out, I would visit the school to get my score card, diploma and certificates. So, I will meet you guys.

It was almost summer vacation time when the guardians or single parents used to take their children home for specific days in different phases to spend some time with them for 10-15 days, and then children needed to be sent back to the orphanage or the fear that your child will be terminated from this organization, that way guardians and single parents would drop their children back on time.

Almost a month was passed by, I was also expecting my mother that she would come and take me with her, and I would be so happy. Finally, she came after some time and said, she will come after two-three days again; she told me to pack my clothes and everything that I had. I had nothing to pack except for a few t-shirts, trousers, and shoes. Well, I did pack everything. After some days, when my mother visited me this time, she had finally come to take me with her and my polythene bags were being checked so that I don't carry any of the books, utensils or anything that could be used for other children. And, while the bag was being checked by the watchman a few items were subtracted from my bag that I considered were mine because I had been using them for years now, and those subtracted things were a steel spoon, a steel - glass, a mess plate and one bedsheet, orphanage people were

there and they told me that I cannot take it with me, it has to be returned and I was like, this is mine, it has my admission number on it and I have been using it for so long; I did not steal anyone's, then I had to lose it and my polythene bag was so light.

When all of this was happening, Godfather was watching everything sitting in the corner and was looking at me and what those people were doing and how I was resisting and reacting. As I was cleared to go, I touched everyone's feet as a gesture of respect, even the feet of the people who subtracted my things which were not actually mine; I am crying right now but I did not cry at that time because I did not know what emotions were; I was angry because they subtracted my things. As I was crossing the gate, Godfather called me and said to be good, take care of yourself, you have a lot of potential, you will be a successful person one day, keep working hard as you do, and he shared his telephone number and his home address on a piece of paper and said, call me on this number.

This time, I was in kind of hurry, I hugged him and said, "Thank You so Much Papa". While turning back to the main gate, I saw little girls, little boys and people looking at me and waving me goodbye with the hope that one day they will be free and soon as I crossed the gate, I told my mother to wait for a minute I forgot something and I ran back in the orphanage and asked them, is it possible that I can come back to meet you all and my friends, they said yes it is your home and that was a big relief. And that is how I was sent off.





# EQUANIMOUS

## OUTWITH



After the last step to the first, my mother took me to her brother's house, and it was a new feeling living among the people you have never lived with and yet they were my relatives.

I still remember how my maternal uncle and his wife were patting me and how happy they were to see me. After staying there for a couple of days, I started disliking the atmosphere; I started feeling heavy and stuck because of his superstitious beliefs and attitude toward reality. It was the first time I was seeing a person involved in religious and all with activities he used to perform like burning dried red chilies and chanting some mantras in a loudly with his eyes wide opened and shaking his body which drained my energy and forced me to move out of there.

Somehow, I managed to call Godfather, and I told him about all the weird things happening at my uncle's house, how horrified I was feeling. And he acknowledged what I had told him, and then he asked me if I had enrolled myself for further studies



and I told him that I don't know what to do, since I have come at my uncle's house I am stuck here and don't understand where to go, whom to ask for help. Godfather told me to visit his house and make a call before I come.

After the call, I felt that I am not alone, Godfather was there to help me and all I had to do was to stay in touch with him. I figured out that why was I finding myself lost; because of the lack of support and everyone around me was barely educated at a sensible level. My days and nights started getting more stressed, now I was missing the walls I disliked all the time of those of the orphanage, I was missing the comfort of the bed, of the pillow, I wanted to have my mess plate to eat food in; I wanted to play with my fellows; I wanted to laugh out loud until my stomach would give up; I wanted to enjoy the smile I used to wear; I wanted to play games in a naughty version of myself; I was missing everything that I had been doing there. After moving out of the orphanage, I realized that I my surroundings were full of vampires and scared people who were draining and scaring me.

Next day, somehow, I asked for some money from my uncle to make a phone call to Godfather and I went in the town to make a phone call at the public calling booth which was almost half a mile away. I made a phone call, and the phone rang, and the call was not answered and then again, I called, and he answered the phone, I introduced myself that, "I am Neeraj from the orphanage." And he asked, "Oh! How are your Neeraj?" I answered and greeted him, I got so happy that he answered my phone, every time I heard his voice I got encouraged and gained confidence to make the moves for myself under the guidance of Godfather.

I asked him, how would I find his residence? He told me to have a pen and paper in hands, and I did not have pen and paper at that moment, and while talking, call dropped because and now I did not have any money to make a phone call. I was already short of money that I had to pay to the telephone booth operator.

The telephone booth operator was yelling at me, that why do you people come to use the facility when you don't have enough money, I felt so ashamed and I told him uncle I would come back in a few minutes, I would pay your money, as I had come to stay at my uncle's house. While I was replying to the operator, the telephone rang, and he answered the phone. And, as he answered the phone, I found a way to escape, and I was about to make a move and he shouted, "Hey boy", what is your name? I replied, my name is Neeraj, he said, there is a call for you, Godfather called back to find if I was still there, and I told him I am out of money, I would go home and get the money to call you back.

Godfather said, "take a deep breath, listen to me what I am saying, he told me to borrow a pen and paper from the operator, I will be on hold." I said, thank you "Papa." And, after I got the pen and paper, I noted down the address and all the instructions he gave me to reach him.

After I came back home, I told my uncle that I was short of money because I talked over the phone a little longer and some more money needs to be paid, he said, don't worry he would pay it.

The next day, I again asked for money, and my uncle questioned me. What are you doing with the money, whom are you talking to? What do you want to do? I told him that there are

admissions are opened for next level of education, and I have been called to get counseled for next level of education. And he gave me the money; I was behaving so nicely so that I don't make any mistake where I wouldn't be given any money to travel.

After I received the money to travel, I was overjoyed and gotten ready to leave, as I was about to leave; aunt shouted my name and said, Neeraj, have breakfast and then leave, and I was afraid that she would ask me questions of whereabouts, so I decided not to eat breakfast and decided to leave hungry by saying that I will eat there where I am going, I would explain everything as I would come back.

It was the first time that I had to travel alone, and I was naïve; had no idea how to travel. But I had all the instruction noted down on a piece of paper. That paper was like a map to me, I went to the town asked people who were standing there. I wished a couple of people good morning and asked if they knew from where would I get the bus to the Jammu city? One woman replied that yes, it is the bus the stop, the bus will stop here, and she was going to the Jammu city, and I politely asked for a favor if she would tell me when to step down. Bus came, and I got the seat with the woman.

After a few miles, I again asked that woman, how long does it take to reach the Jammu City, she got curious and asked me; you are too young to travel alone. Why are you traveling alone and where are your parents? And a few passengers who were in the bus started talking that these days parents are careless, they leave their children alone and that is how children get abducted. And I got scared and worried. If they will tell the driver to stop the bus and I would be left behind as I had to reach on time. A lot of negative thoughts were swarming.

around my little head. I calmed myself down and tried to manipulate the talks, I said, my mother in the Jammu city and I had to leave alone because my uncle and aunt have some important thing going on at home. And, I have recently graduated tenth standard and going to get counseled by the Chief Education Officer, K. K. Hajura, I acted as they are certainly aware of him.

I managed to divert the serious talks and gained their attention; the woman sitting next to me started asking my name, and shockingly saying, Come on, you are lying; you are a little boy, because I was very short heightened, so I showed my school identity card and then she said, don't worry son, I will let you know when Jammu city comes, I have to go to the Jammu city too. Now, I was worriless and enjoying the ride, and a bus conductor came to charge the fare, I paid him the money. And the woman next to me fell asleep, I woke her, Aunty this man asking for the fare, she also paid him the fare. That woman asked me, how much money did I pay to the conductor, she said, you are a student, and he needs to give you back some money, did he return any money? I said no; he did not. She called the conductor, and said, give him his money back, and the conductor said, oh! Yes! Yes! I was going to give him the money, anyway. And I thanked the woman by saying, "thank you very much aunty."

After a few hours, the woman next to me wakes me up and says, this is the Jammu city, where do you have to go? I rubbed my eyes and yawned, and conductor said, get down it is not your house, you should sleep in your house not in the bus. I quickly stepped down, and I made a call to Godfather that I have arrived in the Jammu city. He said, very good, now catch another bus and tell him you need to have to step down near the tube-well and I will be standing waiting for you there. I

followed the instructions and finally reached near the tube-well. I felt confident that wow! Now I can travel alone, All I must do is to remember the places from where to catch the bus and where to step down.

As I was feeling good and saw him coming toward me, I was feeling like a dog wiggles his after seeing his owner, that kind of happiness I was going through.

After he came, I touched his feet and then we walked to his house. As I entered his room following him; he told me to make yourself comfortable. Television was on; news was playing, he turned down the volume and sat in his bed. I was standing like a student in front of a teacher, and he said sit down in the chair; I am not going to punish you. He opened the drawer and pulled a packet of bakery and shared a piece of rusk. He asked me about my choice of subjects I wanted to pursue for higher classes; he was eating the rusk, and I was replying while holding the rusk in my hand and he told me to finish the rusk so we can talk in detail.

He guided me with generosity, encouraging me to remove the fear out of my mind, and he listened to me politely being a mirror to me and guided me with his experience so that I could see more profoundly into myself to attract a healthy confidence. And after some time, he asked, “how are things going?” What are your plans for next level of education? Are they going to be optimistic about your studies? And then he asks me, what did you eat for breakfast? I replied, “Papa” I did not eaten anything because of stress and fear. He then got some sweets out of his refrigerator and given to me, while we were eating sweets, he said, see life is not going to easy; but be very hard and you have to learn to stay strong, never ever give up, because the day you will start giving up on challenges



because they are making you uncomfortable, you are going to fail all the times, so always remember; never ever give up.

And then he asked me a question. Do you know who is Mrs. Shanti Malhotra? I replied, no, I don't. And, he said, note; I am going to give you her name and address. And, I hesitatingly said, I don't have a paper and pen; he changed his tone and said, open the drawer's chest, there is a pen and diary. I took it out and written the name and address of that woman what Godfather was telling me. After noting the details down, I asked, "Papa, can I tear this page off this diary?" He replied in a firm voice no. He said, keep the diary with you. For next time whenever you come to me or go anywhere, always carry this diary with you, and of course a pen too. And, then he guided me that, now you will go to her residence, and introduce yourself that you are from the orphanage and then he told me to update him about the progress. And I touched his and moved out of his room by thanking him.

And I had merely moved a few steps away, and he called my name and said, come here, I went back, but I was scared thinking now, what did I do? Thinking and rushing, "Yes, Papa!" He gave me some hundred rupees and said, it is the fare of the bus and for you to come back to me, he also made me aware by saying that he was a retired officer, and he did not have enough money to help, so make good use of whatever resources you have. I marked his every single word and took his guidance seriously. He was the only person who was helping me to cross the river when I was not aware of swimming the river full of crocodiles.

Next day I made a phone call to Mrs. Shanti Malhotra, and she asked me, who are you and what do you want? I told her I am Neeraj from "Save Us- a home for children" and she asked,

where did you get my number from? I told her I got your phone number from Mr. K. K. Hajura and he told me you once had told him if there is any child who needs help in pursuing higher education that; you will help if anyone from that orphanage needed one.

Then, I told her about myself that how I wanted to pursue for higher education as I had recently graduated from the high school. She said OKAY; you need to come at my residence tomorrow and I agreed to and noted for her residential address. After this conversation I was so happy and excited knitting a lot of positive dreams, in fact for me, it was an achievement that I was able to talk to someone who holds such a higher position in the regional Red Cross Society and I had already seen her stepping out of the car when she used to come to the orphanage to distribute things to the children.

I updated about this telephonic conversation to godfather, and he said Well done, go there and let me know what she says. Next morning, I caught the bus and her residence. On the way back to her house, I saw a lot of posters of her political campaign as she was in into politics too; I was so amazed and excited that I am meeting someone who is so famous and now I would not have any trouble studying further spinning a thought that rich people have a lot of money, and it won't be a matter for her. As I neared to her house entrance, I saw a black plate with white alphabets hanging on the gate with instructions written on it, "Be Aware of Dogs" and thinking of dogs I got a little scared. I started knocking gate instead of ringing the Bell.

I chose to knock the gate instead of buzzing the bell still remember that when someone used to ring the bell in the orphanage, anyone who rang was always punished, that is what

I have always feared that if I made any kind of mistake; I am going to be punished brutally. After a few minutes gate opens, as I saw Mrs. Shanti Malhotra, I smiled with shyness, folded my hands wishing her namaste, touched her feet for blessings. And, she told me to enter the house, as I entered following her she told me to lock the gate, I locked the gate and as I turned back, there was an old man, who was staring at me, I wished him namaste and touched his feet for the blessings too, there was no reply and he started shouting at Mrs. Shanti Malhotra, who are you getting in the house for what purpose.

Later, she told me, the man who was shouting is your uncle, he gets jittery; an indirect way to tell that he is her husband, so I understood, and I told her I did not mind, he is a senior citizen, so I understand. After some time, he called me and asked me what do you want and why have you come here? I introduced myself and told him I have come here, because I need help, I want to pursue for higher studies; I had phoned to madam earlier, and she said to come at her residence, so that is why I have come here. And his wife shouted at him, that why are you asking so many questions, leave him alone. I even gotten more scared in the house, no one else but both, shouting at each other and I thought I am the cause they are fighting, so I felt bad followed the instructions whomsoever called me for whatever reason.

After a few minutes, she offered me a glass of chilly water and then told me to keep the glass and bottle in the kitchen. I followed and sensed the vibes changing; she was sounding different from that she was over the phone, now she was trying to intimidate with her tone and ways of commanding things. I felt trapped because I sensed the insecurity. After I placed a glass and the water bottle in the kitchen, she said keep your polythene bag in the other room; I got confused because there

were so many rooms, and she gotten up saying, follow me, as she escorted me to a garage door; where cycles, scooter, scraps, and spare parts of the car were lying down. She said, take off your shoes, and change your clothes. Now I started feeling uncomfortable, sensing that it was a trap and I told her I need to make a call to Godfather, she said call him later and I requested again that madam I need to make a phone call to Godfather because he had told me to do so.

She got furious and raised her tone and again told me to first change clothes and take off your shoes and shut the door of the garage. She returned after five minutes and saw me in the same way. She got angry, and said you are so ill-mannered, I told you to change your clothes and I replied, "I have only this pair of clothes and nothing else" and then she did not say a word. I felt humiliated, wanted to cry and yet decided not to, I did not want to lose a chance because I wanted to pursue my education.

I took off my shoes and washed my feet to get the access of the house, looking for her to make a phone call to Godfather. And I found her in the kitchen preparing lunch and I used to work in the mess all the time; I had learned to cook, so I thought if I offer some help maybe her behavior would turn to some politeness. So, I said, excuse me madam, may I help you with cooking? She called me in the kitchen and said sit down on the floor and she gave me food; I was hungry, but her husband was hungrier, and he shouted at her and told her to serve him before me.

After he finished eating, I was served some food, after eating was told to place all the utensils into the sink and it was normal because I used to wash utensils all the time in the orphanage-mess and suddenly she told me to mop the floor where I was



eating, and then I thought maybe some drops of water rippled onto the floor so that is why she wanted me to clean and then she said not that small area but entire kitchen floor. I mopped the kitchen-floor and cleaned the marble shelves and then she said rest in the garage; it was so hot and there was not even a fan in the garage, and I felt trapped, I couldn't rest because I was anxious and feeling helpless. After spending so much time thinking, I started saying that I need to bring more clothes to stay here as I have been putting on the same clothes for the last two days and she said okay and do come we will take care of you.

And I made her feel I would come back by touching her feet again, and she allowed me to bring the clothes. I understood that she was lying to my face and somehow; I escaped from that lurking well of fire. After moving out, I took a deep breath until I caught the bus otherwise; I feared being held back; what if she calls me back, so I sped up my feet and caught the bus to run away. Now I was sitting in the bus and patted myself that well-done Neeraj, you saved yourself because it seemed like she wanted to roast me like a chicken for dinner and throw the bones away. My intuition saved me, and as I moved out, I called Godfather and briefed him about the series of events that took place there, and he was to see the curtains erased.

After learning all this, Godfather makes a call to one of his friends who was working with the orphanage and discusses what happened with me when I was sent to the Secretary of Red Cross Society for help at her residence; after finishing the phone call, Godfather told me to go home and call me tomorrow. Next day I called Godfather, and he told me to visit the Orphanage to ask for help to study further, as he had already spoken about this to his friend working with the orphanage.



Right after they directed me to visit the orphanage, I went there and asked for help. And the clerk of the orphanage told me to wait for the officer, only after the order of the President of the orphanage, matter could be executed further. The president came after an hour; I waited until he settled and then I could meet the president; he asked me how was I doing? And then I briefed him about what happened when I went to ask for help and he said, sit down, he rang the bell and told peon to bring two glasses of water: one for each. Then, he started telling me, yesterday he received a phone call from the K.K. Hajura and he already knows what happened.

The president said, Neeraj, we are proud of you, and he would the best he can. He again rings the bell, and this time clerk steps in and he tells a few names to the clerk and directs him to find their contact details. After a few minutes, clerk shows up with the required information, and the president tells me to wait, I will make a few phone calls. It was taking a longer than usual, so I asked the clerk if I can meet my fellows and assured him, I would come back by the time the president gets free. And I was told to, and I did.

After an hour, president rings the bell, and I was nervous and praying within that I hope everything turns out to be favorable. President calls me in and told me that after exploring so many contacts, they found a person who runs a very famous and expensive school in the Jammu City, and he just finished a long conversation with the owner of the school and he is ready to help you by sponsoring your higher education and told me to stay at the orphanage for tonight as it is already evening, meet your friends and prepare for tomorrow. It delighted me to hear this positive news, and I wanted to inform Godfather about this, there was a telephone in the office, I ask for clerk's permission to make a phone call; he unlocked the telephone, and I called

Godfather and updated him; he was laughing with happiness, and he said, okay now get ready for the next level.

After the phone call, I touched everyone's feet whomsoever was available there to get blessings, met my fellows, enjoyed talking to them during evening tea and then dinner. At night I slept in my old dormitory where there was someone else where my bed used to be, I shook hands with everyone, and every child there was so excited to know about the life outside, and, I told them; I was feeling good to be out of the orphanage, I could talk to anyone, and go anywhere, spend as much as time playing, that you can eat, sleep and wake up at any time, you could do whatever you wanted to do, to make them smile and, they would ask, how did you come here today?

I replied to them they have sponsored me for an English medium school for higher studies. And we talked on and on all night and next morning I geared up early in the morning, preparing to go to the school, I went to the office and waited for someone to come and assist me for further advances. I asked for the school address; I carried one notebook, a pen and some money to come back and I was told to maintain the record how much money I was being given, and how much money will be spent and left, I had breakfast and left for the school.

Now I could travel on my own without holding the fear of being kidnapped. I was the only student from the orphanage who was being sponsored for higher education there to study in a very expensive school, this school named as Swami Mahavir Jain Higher Secondary School, this school had an image of a Premier Institution and most of the children enrolled there were of wealthy families. And, getting enrolled, there was a matter of fortune in such kind of school. The irony of the time is that till

date I don't who was that person who sponsored my education. But it was so nice of him; I wish wonderful life and peace for him or her whosoever sponsored my education.

My first day in that school was excited and jaw-dropping for me, the confidence level of the children studying there was high, for the first time I heard the word f\*ck and I wondered what it is, I searched about it and found it was a vulgar slang, and I used to think how can use this profanity in the school. This education standards of this school were challenging to me because prior to this I had studied in the Hindi medium school and getting enrolled in the English medium school was an enormous thing for me.

When I graduated high school, I used to sit in the front row of my class. In this higher secondary school, it was the first instance when I had to sit at the last row like back benchers for the very first time. For some days I started arriving early in the school to occupy the front row but every time I sat in the front row and then a girl would come and tell me to shift to the next and then a few boys and they said sit behind the first row and by the time class started I was at the at the back bench. Facing all of that, I understood that I have stepped in an unfamiliar world where manners and rules are less obeyed. I started learning to adjust myself in the unfamiliar environment to get ahead, which in fact was hardest thing I had ever faced during my school days.

I started sitting at the back bench. From the backside it was easy for me to observe, which would give me some time to think. I used to compare the contrast of the white uniform that every student had to wear; it was mandatory and sometimes students would wear a different color blended with white and I would think it is not complete white and yet they may sit in the

class whereas mine was dull white, while later I understood that thinking in that pattern, I was wasting my time. But it was the part of cultural shock I got after getting into a new school.

After a few days, the teacher enters the classroom and everyone was gossiping, neither students would bother about the teacher's presence nor the teacher, the teacher would call all the names for attendance, anyone who will speak yes will be present and anyone who missed the response would be marked absent. I was paying close attention for my name and my name was not spoken, and in the rhythm of being a sincere student in my previous school, I raised my hand and said Sir, my name was not spoken, he said you missed your call, he said back benchers always have this trouble because you guys keep talking and never listen to what teacher says, I replied, Sir, No, I was here paying close attention, He said, Okay!, What is your Name, I replied, "My Name is Neeraj" and he asked, Neeraj What?

I replied, my name is Neeraj, and he asked, what is your Surname? I answered, Sir, I don't know my surname, He shouted, I am asking about your surname, and it confused me why is he repeating the same word all over again. I couldn't understand the meaning of the word 'surname', I was familiar with the word last name, I replied, Sir I don't know, then everyone along with the teacher started laughing, and he told me to sit down, and I felt so bad because I felt insulted. Then, I asked a student about his name who was sitting next to me, he told me that his name is Henry Eliade, and he told me that his surname is Eliade, so I understood what the word surname meant. Later we became friends, I told him I have graduated from the Hindi medium school that is why I could not understand what the teacher was talking about, he said that is okay and we shook hands.



After the school, I went to the orphanage and saw Godfather there and it excited him to know about the first day of my school. I told him each and everything, then he told me you will face problems since the atmosphere of the school is new for you, he said, you need to learn and you pay close attention to what the teacher says and note each word that you don't understand and later find and learn by finding those words in the English dictionary and I did as he told me to do.

Next Day, again there was attendance time and this time again my name was not called, I was worried about that if I am enrolled yet or not, I asked the teacher, no teacher calls my name, and he said, have you deposited the admission fee? I feared this question because of lack of money, I replied, I live in an Orphanage, and everyone looked back at me like I uttered some inappropriate word but this time no one smiled or laughed everyone was silent even the teacher. He asked me what Orphanage do you live in?

I told him we are a group of almost sixty-four children, boys, and girls, people who don't have their parents and militancy affected children are living there, he told me to sit down, and I was feeling humiliated because I was never asked this question by anyone wherever I studied. I bowed down my head crying and then a few boys came and said do not cry, I said, I don't have money, I can't pay the fee, my orphanage people told me to come in this school and the school owner told them to send me to this school.

And, then this teacher's period was over, next period started and the School Principal, H.P. Singh entered the class, and everyone was silent, he looked at me because my physical



appearance differed from others; he came to me and asked my name and where do I live? He said, stand in front of the blackboard, I was scared that I may have made some mistake and maybe I will get scolded now, then he stood next to me, and he said, attention everyone, He introduced me saying, this is Neeraj and he lives in Save Us- an Orphan Association and he is sponsored for his education, no one will misbehave with him, he is like all of you, treat him with politeness, if any teacher asks anything, while he was introducing me, a teacher entered the class and the Principal told him that no teacher would ask for any kind fee or contribution from this student, teacher also said that he would tell all other teachers to keep this thing in mind, and the Principal hugged and patted me and said after the class come in the Principal Office.

And Later I went to the principal's office, and he told me to sit in the chair, it was for the first time I sat in the chair in front of the principal of a school and he rang the bell and peon gave me water to drink. This peon was stopping me to get in the principal's office, and later he smiled, showed some respect, and asked me if I needed one more glass of water. Principal called the clerk and asked him, why this student's name is not being displayed in the attendance and he said high class diploma is not submitted.

After a few days, I recalled it was left at the house of Red Cross Secretary, Mrs. Shanti Malhotra's Garage and I forgot to collect it from her residence and I got it and was never a question or even asked for the tuition fee or any kind of monetary contribution, everything was given free of cost to me, books, uniforms and special attention and I made a couple of friends and I was finally being able to laugh and smile in the class and it was a very good feeling.

Now all the students began shaking hands with me and for me this moment was exciting, because being a poor student I had that inferior complex and now it was seeming to go away. Shaking hands with students gave me a confidence that I am just like them, not different anymore. I started feeling respected, before no one used to talk to me, and now everyone was wishing me Hello! Hi! How are you? And I felt overjoyed and started greeting them with double enthusiasm, and things went well.

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After getting warm attention from the school, I started learning to groom myself, a nice hairstyle, ironed clothes, attempts to get myself into the new environment made me so confident and I got more time to think of myself and how to step up next step but, working through these aspects, the loneliness deep down inside was eating my alive, the time I was spending in the institute turned into my favorite time but after the school I started feeling lonely. Feeling of loneliness grew and being an adolescent, I was getting over stressed, apprehensive, churning of brain with excessive thought process made me feel vulnerable that affected memorizing capacity and I fought back with my senses to cover it and I graduated eleventh grade.

Graduating eleventh grade was an achievement for me, and I was feeling so happy to see my result that I graduated without a failure and the reason it was a big thing for me because I studied this grade in the English medium earlier, I had only studied Hindi medium. When my result got declared, Godfather congratulated me on my graduation and also made me aware

that my marks were not as expected based on the preparation I was doing and said now it is the time for serious twelfth grade and you will have to work harder, and I want to see you becoming a doctor. And I always said, yes! I will do it.

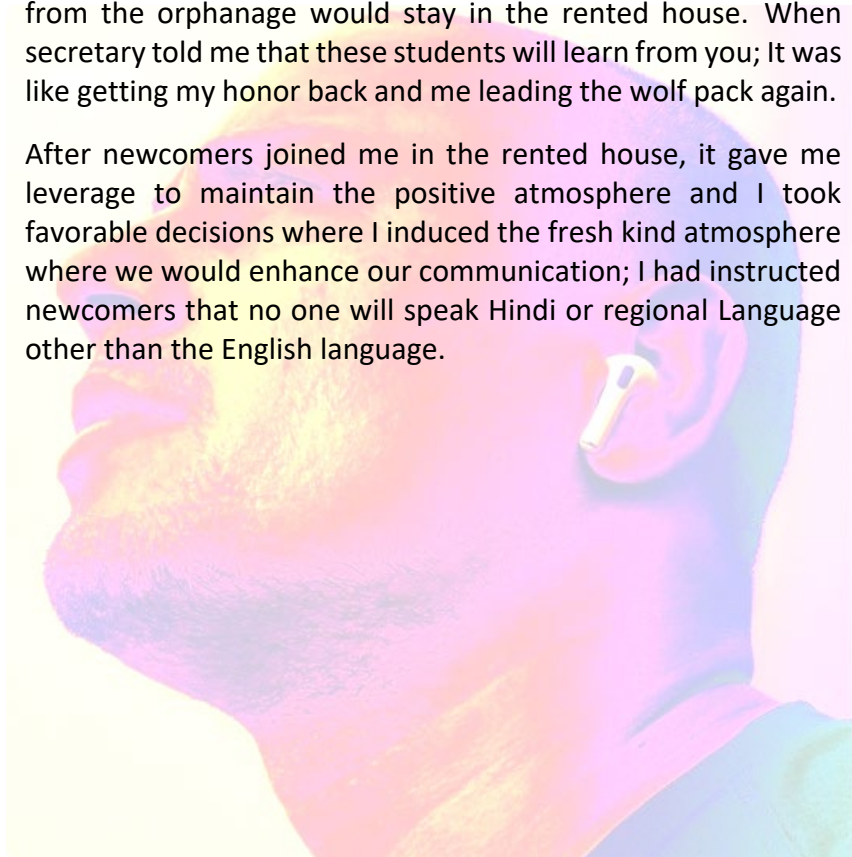
Later, Godfather did some evaluation of the time and found out that my most of the time was being spent in traveling to school and coming back home was over four hours back and forth; because first I would walk a mile cross the Railway Station and will catch the passenger bus and then from there one hour to reach the school and same time getting home. He made it easy for me. He then again discussed with the orphanage association that Neeraj is doing well in studies and if has more time, he could even better.

After evaluation and discussing the time management and with the help of orphanage authorities, he came up with an idea of me staying near the school, where I would spend less time in traveling and more in studying. Next day, Godfather took me to his residence and showed me the room where I would stay as he had already explored and managed the room for me. He also told me you do not have to worry; all you have to do is to study and cook for yourself. He also told me I would get ration from the orphanage, rent and traveling reimbursement after would provide them detailed expenditure.

After moving into the rented room, he instructed me how to note down and guided me; every time you pick the bus note the fare you have paid, and you have to do it back and forth. And I got so excited that I would stay near to the school and in the supervision of Godfather that I would get some help from him in the English Language.

After a few days, I was told to visit the orphanage and made me aware of that they are sending a few more candidates with me who will stay in the same room, because they had also graduated tenth standard, and the secretary told me that these students would be in your supervision, manage and report to us for anything you need; it was the first instance when children from the orphanage would stay in the rented house. When secretary told me that these students will learn from you; It was like getting my honor back and me leading the wolf pack again.

After newcomers joined me in the rented house, it gave me leverage to maintain the positive atmosphere and I took favorable decisions where I induced the fresh kind atmosphere where we would enhance our communication; I had instructed newcomers that no one will speak Hindi or regional Language other than the English language.



I taught my juniors the ways of how we can embrace ourselves if we can communicate in the English language. And they enrolled a few more students in the same school; they were safe from being humiliated because I had made it easy for them by conquering then present situations or you can say that they were playing safe on my experience. The name of our orphanage was already echoing we had attained ourselves and we only used to communicate in the English language that gave us an ornament of confidence that helped us to extend ourselves a one step ahead each time we moved ahead.

Now I was not alone at all, we would walk like we owned and given a new world to live, it was a new way and taste to live outside the fence and there was no one to stop us, how long we wanted to gossip, no one was there to wake us up in the early morning, now I recall and cherish that memory by assessing, what we were experiencing was the ecstasy of freedom emerging through us.

Faculty in the school, people in our neighborhood, bus drivers, vegetable vendors, sweet shops, owners were our recent friends. We had stepped into a brand another world of our kind, we used to walk in a group by saying 'Unity is strength.' The word I was turning into WE. We were three boys living in that rented room. Every month we would get some calculated money for the bus fare and weighed ration to survive and study. I was in the twelfth standard; it was the only path where I could have proven my credibility and capability, while everyone at the orphanage had a high hope that I would secure good marks so that the name of our orphanage would shine one day, and they would feel proud of raising a brilliant child and seeing that child becoming a doctor is what everyone was hoping. I was working on my studies hard, and it was like a few months more and I would get good marks to reach my goal.



And one night. I remember, it was so humid that sleeping in the room was getting uncomfortable, and I went upstairs onto the roof to feel easy and to sleep under the cold sky with the moonlight. I did not have any cot to sleep onto the roof; I wanted to sleep onto the roof, but I was afraid if crawlers would get into my ears. So, I saw a concrete water tank, at the good height where I thought; it was safer than the roof and climbed the water tank and lied down. I was without t-shirt or vest, so I could feel the cold concrete on my back, I started looking into the sky finding meteor shower and wishing for my good grades.

While watching the dark blue sky, I fell unconscious and woke up rubbing my eyes, and as I got up, my eyesight started blurring. I kept rubbing my eyes all night and before an hour to the dawn, somehow, I went downstairs and woke up one of my juniors, Harish Kumar and requested him to see what's in my eyes. He tried to raise my eyelids with his thumbs and tried to find out what had gotten into my eyes or if some crawler stung me. He said, there is nothing he could not understand the cause.

I got scared and requested Harish to take me to Godfather's house, which was almost a mile away. I put on my school shirt and left for Godfather's house. I was horrified because I was losing my vision and as we arrived at his residence; he started knocking the door, and I was calling Godfather, Papa-Papa, please wake up, I can't see anything and told him that my eyes are hurting. He opened the gate and asked me what happened? I replied, I was asleep and woke up itching and now I can barely see anything. He instructed Harish to take me to the nearest Government Medical College, Shiv Nagar Hospital, which was further than a mile away, somehow, we reached the hospital.

I still remember while we were walking to the hospital, Harish asked me, Neeraj, your exams are a few months away and now you have gotten this problem, how would you complete your studies, and I got more scared and worried, and I told him to please remember me in his prayers and wish me a speedy recovery. And, we kept on walking, but the intensified worry was hollowing me within that just a little time is left to take main examinations of the twelfth standard, and I will miss, and I wouldn't be able to get through. I was begging and requesting Harish to please pray for my well-being.

We arrived at the hospital around 04:30 in the morning and saw that inquiry was closed, all the counters were unattended, all the doors of the hospital were shut and no one was there to attend patients, only admitted patient's ward was accessible but any nurse was awake, we woke up a few nurses and sought help but they responded rudely because we disturbed their sleep and their response was doctors would come at 10:00 am; I was feeling restless and impatient. After banging so many doors of the hospital, one nurse woke up and told me to take off my shoes and get in the room. I took off my shoes and entered the room; she told me to lie down on the bed, and then she poured a few eyes-drops in my eyes. She also gave me a bottle of eye-drops for free and told me to use only if the pain would grow intense and told me to visit the hospital around 10: 00 am and I did the same.

By the morning itching swelled my left eyeball shut, and I was crying, it scared me; it traumatized me when I saw my face in the mirror; I felt like my eye would explode to blindness. I measured the size of the eyeball by placing my fingers on the swollen part and started measuring the swollen area would get healed in what time to calm my mind because I was more worried about my studies than this pain, but this was the only

way out and it was a few months to the final examination, and I was referred as a special case to the E.N.T. Hospital Shalimar, Jammu and got admitted there.

And, next thing I know, I woke up in a patient's ward with intravenous tubes in my veins, and as I glanced left, Godfather was sitting beside me seemed like as if he was waiting for me to wake up, he knew what I was going through. The moment I woke up, he smiled and said, Good Morning, Neeraj! How are you? I said, I am doing well, and he said, no, you are not doing well; you are in the hospital. Doctors are working on you, it will take a little while, have patience, I am going home now and someone from the orphanage has already arrived in the hospital to be around you for the rest of the day. Later when a woman who we used to call 'Maa ji' came to stay with me and I smiled, and thanked her for coming, she got emotional and touched my forehead and I changed the topic where has Godfather gone? She replied, he had to go to take his medicine because he is a diabetic patient.

After some time, a team of doctors came with interns and started inquiring about my name, age, location and who was with me? I replied, I am Neeraj, and my Papa i. e. Godfather has just left and then the woman sitting beside me talked something I couldn't hear and then doctor smiled, and he said, you need a special treatment and we can't do it until someone from your family signs it; he asked me where is your mother and father; I said I don't have parents; I live in an orphanage, and Maa ji told doctors that she would make a phone call and someone would be here in no time. Then, the Secretary of the orphanage visited me in the hospital. And as I saw him, I tried to touch his feet, and he said no-no, keep lying down, you will get hurt, I was helpless looking his face and he was trying to smile to bring that smile on my face, and then a drop right from

my left eye drawn a line to my left ear and he touched my forehead and he said, you don't have to cry, if you cry, it will take longer to get well, So, I started sobbing.

While the secretary of the orphanage was talking to me, after a little a senior doctor came there, and they shook hands and started talking about my medical case. I heard them discussing a probability of a tumor; I understood it that I have cancer or going to be diagnosed for cancer; I pretended like I did not understand; I turned my face on the other side and woke up the stubborn part in me that don't cry by telling myself that you will die and don't have enough time to live.

And I told myself to Just stay quiet, and, then secretary called my name Neeraj Look here, and I bravely replied, yes sir, secretary told the doctor that he is a very intelligent student, and he is studying Medical Science in a very good school, and he wishes to become a doctor one day, take care of him and doctor nodded yes. He wrote some findings and reports on my hospital admission file in a messy writing, but I could easily figure out what doctor had written. I was given chemotherapy, probably to heal the area around my nostrils next to the eye - orbit, and that condition was Orbital Cellulitis.

And, now I wanted to know more about my health conditions, deep inside I was afraid of not being cured because any doctor who will visit me, they would ask me my name and they would talk for a few minutes and they say shift him in another room, take him to the CAT Scan, take him to the other ward, increase the antibiotic-doses. And people from the orphanage would visit me every day turn by turn and would bring me good food and fruits that I was very much fond off, because they had told the mess-cook too, and he knew what I was fond of so, he



would send the food that I liked. I was suspicious that why all these things are being so easy for me?

And a month passed by, almost all staff members had visited me, and that evening Godfather came to me and said, how are you doing? I replied, I am fine and asked him, why are the doctors keeping me here for so long? It has been so long that I haven't seen trees, the moon, the sun, the stars, has weather changed? I was there for a long time; I knew how many lines there in the room's ceiling were; I knew how many beds there in my ward were, people were being admitted and leaving wishing me to get well soon and saying goodbyes.

I told Godfather that I want to walk; he said because of this intravenous fluid; it does not allow you to walk out, and it is not good for you; you are in the process of healing. And, he said, give me that medical file that is under your pillow; I said I can't move because the needled part of my arm was hardened because of multiple injections and continuous fluid; he came on the other side and started reading and I asked him, what is it saying? He said nothing much, but you will be all right soon. And I started crying making no noise, I said, I know I have cancer and you are not allowed to tell me; I said I know it for over a month now and I see anyone who visits me never tells me anything, at least tell me what is happening to me?

I told him about my fears; I told him I want to get out from the hospital as soon as possible; I want to prepare for my examinations because of my aim is set and want to become a doctor, I can do good in the exams, and I have a very few time left to take my examination, if this hospital would not leave me early, I won't be able to prepare for my exams. He said, your life is more important than your exams, he said, even if you can't



do anything in the exams, we know that you are still an intelligent student, and we are proud of you.

He said, we have already informed your schoolteachers about your sickness, so do not worry about your school at all. And the nurse came and injected me something and I felt dizzy, but paying attention to what is happening, losing the ability to hear the noise, and then sinking consciousness and rippled down to the bottom in the well of unconsciousness.

Next morning when I woke up, I saw a Muslim man was praying on the floor, everyone was sleeping, I was awake and saw him and after he concluded his prayer; he came to me and given me something to eat; I don't remember what was I given; I denied that I don't want to eat, and he placed on my table and he said, you will be all right and he left. I never saw him again.

Around 10:00 O'clock in the morning, a team of doctors visited me and then they told my attendant, a female whom we used to call Maa ji in the orphanage to get Neeraj ready for operation, he needs to undergo an important and critical surgery, and they need the signatures as a consent and responsibility before starting the operation. She got scared as she was alone, and news of a critical operation and signatures swirled her mind. I could look at her face and she was showing me her smiles layered on the fear of losing me and I was smiling and crying at the same time, she came close to me and hugged me tightly and said, you stay here; I need to call the secretary, so he comes and signs the papers.

Now, I feared being torn apart; I was scared that they will operate on me, and I would scream a lot and a lot of blood would be lost; I was already weak; I was innocent; I knew nothing about surgery; it was something shocking and serious.

for me I had never thought of, while I was swimming in the river of fears, the secretary of the orphanage came, saw me, signed the papers and went away. And that day I could not eat anything except drinking water. I hoped that day ends soon, and I will get through this fear. Either I would live or die. They scheduled to operate me around 11:00 O'clock in the morning by a famous Dr. Aniket Choudhary an E.N.T. specialist and the H.O.D. of Government Medical College, Shalimar, Jammu.

Soon Godfather arrived as I was expecting him to be with me, he told me, all the children and staff of the orphanage remembered me in the morning prayers and sent you wishes to get well soon, I asked him, really? He said, yes, and he said, they all love you and you are our star, be strong we will wait for you, then nurse calls my name and tell my attendant to get me in the operation theater. After I was taken to the operation theatre, my attendant signed one more set of papers, everyone was so serious, there were four to five people from the orphanage, they hugged me and said; they are waiting for me; I saw the red light, and I was scared and not scared, like death and life were playing a gamble on my body, I handed over myself to the god and asked if you want to keep me alive; make me able to take my examination, it is important to me because I was in love with my education or don't keep me alive to bear the pain.

Now I was taken into the operation theater, they told me to lie in a very comfortable bed with lights hovering; I understood it was the operation bed; I was feeling lighter because for the first time after a month and few days I was without needles. And then a female came near to me with an injection, and I smiled because that injection was huge, and she said are you winking at me because my infected eye was closed, I said, no I would never do that because that is a bad habit. She said yes, you are;

I said my eye is not well; I am sick; I swear I am not winking at you and started crying, and she said hey, no; I was joking; she said lie down; I lied down, and she injected me and I fell down in the rippling well and next thing I remember, when I woke up someone was finishing bandages over my eyes and a team of doctors escorted my bed to the hands nurses and told them to take him to ICU. Maa ji came and hugged me, and I asked what day it is today, she smiled and said, I will tell later you just rest now.

After Some time, when I woke up in the evening, the tissue removed through my sinus was kept beside me in a black box. I wanted to see it, how it looked like what was inside me and causing so much trouble. While I was talking about the black box, a nurse came to take the box, and I asked her, what is in it? I want to see, she said, it needs to be taken to get examined. Then Godfather came and asked me how am I doing? I said, I am not doing well; he smiled and said, now you are doing well, and you will be out soon, I got so excited and thanked him for everything.

And all other people who were around me were telling me how hard it was to wait that your operation took over four hours; almost four hours and thirty minutes, and they were told that operation will be completed within an hour, and a lot of times, those people knocked the operation theater to know about me, whether I was dead or alive and, learning this my heart started aching with the surge of emotions and the pain I had gone through all those days, I had almost given up on life because the way I was sick; I was not sure if I would make it up or not. Then, Godfather said, well Done, you fought hard, and he also told me I still have a month and a half to prepare to take the examination.

I was overjoyed, but I was so weak, the people in the surroundings were looking at my recovering enthusiasm. They said you still have to stay in the hospital for a week until your reports come, and you get healed.

Next day, a series of doctors were visiting me, president and secretary of the orphanage visited me and it was the moment I felt that I am not alone, but for a moment, I felt that what if my parents were with me; I wanted to have their presence, but my parents were so cruel that they did not even want to know about my whereabouts, I used to look at other children in my ward where their parents would come and visit their children and would never their kids alone, their mothers will put their children's head in their lap, kiss their foreheads, their father will pour milk in their glass and ask if they wanted fruit or anything, I remember when I was witnessing this family scene in reality; I was feeling miserable because I needed that attention too, I still remember this and this feeling under my skin always screech through my memory reservoirs and eyes never stop flowing the river of that innocent childhood murder.

Even though I did not have parents with me, those people in the orphanage took care of me and given me everything they could have, that is why I used to call that female attendant as Maa ji and the Godfather as Papa because those words were powerful because every time they were spoken, I was always listened and paid attention to.

After doctors discharged me from the hospital, I was so happy to see outside world, people, and people, cars, roads, trees, birds, dogs, shops, buildings and now I was walking like I have recently learned how to walk. It was a beautiful feeling to walk again. And now I was left behind in the education, I did not know where to start and at night I used to stay awake until late

morning to study and revise chapters and chapters, all over again, I would challenge myself by closing the book and opening the book and whatever I will see, should be learned, this way I was prepared to take my examinations and finally I passed by scoring 57.50% and I was so happy that I could do it even though I remained sick on my prime time but numbers speak, so I didn't get good marks to remain sponsored for my education.

Even though I could make no one so proud of my result but I was proud of myself because I knew how hard I had worked to get through twelfth standard. Godfather congratulated me and said, you did well, and you still have a chance to prove, there is a competitive exam called Common Entrance Test and if you get good marks, your chances of become doctor are still alive. And, I was excited now, result was declared, registration forms were being filled offline for the Common Entrance Test and to get the admit card to appear in the examination, I needed the Permanent Resident Certificate (PRC) of Jammu and Kashmir, and I did not have that because these documents are prepared with the help of parents and I was out of luck and then I started exploring my beginnings and how I got the Permanent Resident Certificate of Jammu and Kashmir was inconceivable.





## BATTERING



Now a new chapter had begun, I needed permanent resident certificate which was a mandatory document for applying to the state common entrance test, failing to produce this document during the registration means I was not eligible to take part in it. This fear of being left behind in the study sparked my mind to find the ways; how to get this document?

After this requirement, I started exploring my roots; how did I get enrolled in the Orphanage? Where am I from? Who is my father? I had never seen my father; I did not even know if I ever had a house; I did not know why haven't I seen my father, why my mother used to come alone, why my father never wanted to see me? Why have my parents deserted me in the orphanage if they were alive? Why my father never tried to find me, was I so ugly to look at, was I their own blood?

A lot of questions started swarming my adolescent head. I wanted to go to the orphanage to know where I am from. I wanted to know everything about it, and I approached Godfather and asked for help and he guided me to visit the orphanage because when a child is admitted in the orphanage,

every child's detail and the cause of enrollment used to be archived.

Next day I went to the orphanage and explained them about the urgency of the information that I was seeking to access my beginnings to get the permanent resident certificate of Jammu and Kashmir which was a necessary document to get enrolled for the upcoming Common Entrance Test for M.B.B.S. and to be eligible for that I needed my real residential address. I emphasized that I wanted this permanent resident certificate anyhow.

On my request, the administrator of orphanage delivered me the information of my whereabouts and revealed that I was from Jakh, a place situated almost at the distance of twenty-six kilometers away South on the edge of national highway, and no one knew where was it except an ex-serviceman who was retired from Indian Army named Magar Singh who had joined the orphanage to teach discipline and to contribute his time to help the children to keep them away from being derailed. He came forward while I was being supplied the desired information and he said, he knows where this place is because he was the inhabitant of the nearest town which was two miles away from the district of my hometown.

After acquiring this much information, I informed Godfather about the details and told me to visit him. As I arrived at his residence, he told me that this permanent resident certificate takes a long time, and he started exploring his personal diary. After spending a minute or two he found some contacts and then he started making calls to the contacts he found in his diary. After speaking to someone over the phone, he smiled and said he knows someone who lives in my hometown and then he told me to get ready the day after tomorrow but before

we both go there; you go to your town and find your father if you can.

At night, I was so excited that I will travel to a new location and there I will first time see my father; My heart was beating fast, my feet were trembling, wanted time to just fly and my small heart was just waiting to be wrapped into a tight, secure hug, as soon as I would deboard the bus. LOVE, SECURITY, BOND FOREVER. That is what I imagined at that time. Just love, love of a father, his hand on my head, love of a mother, sleeping next to her at night and listening to her stories, just love. Nothing else.

I could hardly sleep at night with full of hopes and excitement; I had been told and taught that parents are like God, and they love their children no matter what happens; they are always there for them. I was so high hoping to receive a warm welcome and happiness would spread on my ways, my father would help me and now the ways started easy to me, I was over excited because I had seen in Hindi movies, read comics, seen boys of my age with their parents, that how the children receive warmth and their parents hug them and cry, just having this notion, I thought that I will get everything.

Next morning, I went to the bus-stand and started inquiring about the bus that would take me to my hometown; I started asking people standing there; I was so much excited as if I wanted to scream and tell the entire world that I will meet my father today. And I would timidly ask people standing if anyone knew about my hometown Jakh, where and how far is it, how long does it take to arrive there.

Finally, I asked a man who was a bus conductor if he knew where the Jakh was? He nodded, yes, get in the bus and I was

afraid of being cheated, what if he takes me somewhere else? I asked him, would you drop at my village Jakh, he replied, loudly, if you want to get in the bus, get in or back off. I caught the bus and kept telling the bus conductor now and then that please drop me at village Jakh. After a few minutes, he started collecting fare from the passengers and I had my eyes on him, seeing him so busy, and I again requested, sir, make sure you stop the bus there at my village because I don't know how far it is and where is it. He yelled at me and said, sit down kid, I will tell you when we reach there. I got scared and yet I politely requested by folding my hands. Please drop me there. And now I was so sure that this conductor will drop me there.

Every time bus stops and starts I would ask the conductor, how far is it? How would I come to know what area is Jakh? And he said, are you traveling for the first time? I replied, yes, for the very first time and I want to step down there in the village, the conductor was probably annoyed with my impatient behavior and of course he was right on his part, if I were him, I would have reacted the way he did.

I remember it was winter, sunlight was intermittent, window glasses were misty, I was getting uncomfortable being anxious that what if this conductor stays busy talking to someone and my place would be left behind? But at the same time I was so excited to see the fog along the highway and the bus was running too fast; it was spiking the adrenaline rush in my body; I started feeling cold, and I requested the conductor to close the glass window; he closed it for me, and then I started feeling warm and comfortable because no chilling wind was bothering me at all. I started feeling sleepy with the comfortable sitting and the conductor was waking me up and he said, stay awake if you want to step down at your village Jakh and I fought with my eyelids and stayed awake.

While traveling, I was watching so many places and looking at people, especially children with their mothers; I was comparing my situation as I had seen in the Hindi movies that how parents hug their children, how they give them whatever they need, how they give them food, clothes, and buy them sweets; And my pure innocent brain understood only what it had observed. And. I was drawing castles in the air of receiving warmth and expecting that my father would do the same. Suddenly the bus conductor cuts the cord of my dream spinning wire and called me saying, hello! And said, come here fast and step down here, this entire village is called Jakh, I requested him that drop me in the main site of the Jakh Village and he said get down; I don't know what is the key place; I felt he was rude to me later; I understood that it was his way or he would not make what he is after. I learned new experience and new lesson.

Now I had stepped down in the place where I was born, touching the ground flashed my mind with those tall eucalyptus trees but this time those trees were gone leaving drying trunks down probably saying goodbye to me. I unexpectedly had stepped down in front of a fast-food shop which was exactly opposite to my father's house, this I didn't know until I found my father. I could see the man who was standing in that shop was frying some kind of Indian snacks in a wide black pan on the rapid fire. As it is, it was cold outside; I was starving too, and I only had a few bucks to spend on something other than bus fare but anyhow I wanted to eat to feel calm and wanted to talk to someone to get the way to reach my father, and I thought if I would eat from this shop, this shopkeeper would talk to me friendly and maybe guide me to my father's house.

As oil was burning and frying smell was sparking my attention. I slowly stepped up the stairs and said, excuse me sir, how much is it? I am hungry, ; I want to eat. He said Rs. 5 only, And I paid



him the money in advance and enjoyed that snack made up of two slices of bread with black chickpeas and a sweet-sour sauce. And, while eating the snack I started the conversation by appreciating that the snack was yummy, he smiled a little and I didn't want to lose the chance to start the inquiry, then I asked him, if he knew any man whose name is Sh. Mohan Krishan, he asked me, what does he do? I replied, I don't know; I will meet this person for the first time; I did not disclose that I was looking for my father and then that snacks-vendor told me he is non-native, and he was running that snack-shop on rent and he is from another state, so he didn't know much about anyone except a couple of visitors who visit them.

Again, I asked the snack-vendor, do you know if there is anyone who knows everything about this village; he said go to the main market, and I decided not to go the main market because days are shorter in winter than summer, so I commenced the exploration right where I was standing, I was not feeling comfortable standing near the snack-vendor's shop because many people were visiting him and giving me a weird look as I was an alien not a human and asking vendor in a low voice, who is this variety, because of my looks maybe and the way I was speaking with him which was not the common way of a villager.

Finally, I decided to cross the road and thought I would start from that house first where the trunks of the eucalyptus trees are, and smoke was coming out from a house across the road. As I went down to the slope and knocked on the small brown gate. Knock, knock! Is someone there? No reply, then I saw a man pumping water through hand-pump, I mildly raised my pitch and said, excuse me, sir! He did not pay attention, I repeated, excuse me sir, could you please listen to me for a minute? He came near the gate so close; I got scared and backed off a couple of steps and asked myself whatever you

want to ask, ask quickly. I politely in a scared tone introduced myself to him that I am Neeraj, and I am looking for Sh. Mohan Krishan. Could you please guide me what way leads to his home?

And, suddenly he started using tough vulgar slangs and shouted at me, you mother f\*\*\*\*r; do you think you can take this property, I won't give you a bit, I was so shocked that, why was this man getting aggressive, for a while I thought maybe he was and I asked the wrong question to him, maybe he is already angry at something. And I humbly apologized to him with my weeping eyes, I was saying I am sorry; I did not know that I should not have asked this question like this, and, within a minute an old woman with white and gray hair came close to the gate and started yelling at that man because he was using profanity.

As she neared and asked that man, who is there at the gate and why was he yelling? He again used profanity stating that this mother f\*\*\*\*r is looking for Mohan Krishan. As that old woman came near the gate, an old woman called my name Neeraj, I stepped back, one more time she said Neeraj, I stepped back in haste and that moment my I felt the pull and I pushed myself back, she repeatedly called my name several times and something unusual was happening to me because of my heartbeat raced and breath with the fear of being killed or attacked or getting hostile.

I did not want to stand there anymore even for a minute and I started stepping back and ran back to catch the bus, by that time it was already evening which meant very fewer chances of getting a bus to commute, because in the villages there are a few buses and those buses run on a schedule, I stopped a roadways bus way to my rented house. As I caught the bus I was

shaking badly because I was horrified, the bus conductor came near me and asked for the fare and I found money was lost probably fallen somewhere while running to escape from that moment, I told the bus conductor that I lost my money; he said nothing except he asked my name and I told him I am studying and want to be a doctor; he patted me and said, that is okay. I thanked him and told him, if next time we meet, I would return the money that I owe you for this bus fare.

After arriving at my rented house, I could not sleep well that night because my little heart was wrenched and mind could not understand; how could someone abuse his own blood and flesh?, I was trying to be okay, but I was failing to do so, I could not eat meals because every time I would take a bite and chew a memory of abuse would bring tears to my eyes and my nostrils would get full because of the trauma and fear that man (probably my father) had induced in me and I was thinking how that old woman (probably my grandmother) knew my name and why she was repeatedly calling my name, why was he so arrogant and wicked to me, I was well behaved and well mannered; I did nothing to offend him, or neither I said something inappropriate.

And next morning I shared the incident with Godfather, and he said, don't worry, tomorrow he would go along with me in my village as he was invited for lunch of his relative's marriage ceremony.

Next Day, I went to the Village Jakh with Godfather in the bus; we stepped down in the main market far away from that stop where I had stepped down earlier. When the bus was passing by, I showed Godfather the house and place where that incident took place two days ago. He said do not worry, let's enjoy the lunch first, he took me to his relative's house where

the lunch was organized. As Godfather entered the house where he was invited, people started touching his feet and anyone who touched his feet, I touched their feet, and they all asked about me and then he introduced me to them.

While eating Godfather started the talk and told those people that Neeraj's father lives somewhere in the village Jakh. And they asked my full name; I told them my name is Neeraj Kumar and then they asked me what's your father's name and I replied, my father's name is Sh. Mohan Krishan. Those people started talking among themselves to know if anyone knows anyone with that name. They couldn't exactly recognize how to resemble the bond because they were finding this name new, because in the village many people have their nicknames and that's how people interact with each other and not pay much attention to the actual names.

After having lunch, Godfather and I walked north for five minutes and arrived in the prime market of the village Jakh where we had stepped down from the bus. As he was passing by a lot of old men were waving hello to him and I felt that honor walking with him, I would also fold my hands and wish Namaste to whomsoever he inter-reacted with. And now Godfather entered the shop, again he gets a warm welcome and the shopkeeper asked him, how come today you have come this way? Godfather told him about me and my circumstances, how I tried to connect to his father and how was I treated?

Godfather introduced me again and I touched the shopkeeper's feet and Godfather told the shopkeeper that Neeraj is an Intelligent boy, and he is preparing for M.B.B.S. Common Entrance Test, and he needs an important document i.e. Permanent Resident Certificate to take the exam which will be



held in two weeks from now. Godfather told the shopkeeper that Neeraj had already visited a house two days ago someone used harsh words, where some old woman and a man mistreated him, and hopefully that man is his father and the old woman his grandmother.

Godfather told the shopkeeper about what happened a few days ago and how I cried and ran away from there. And, then shopkeeper asked me, what happened when you went to that house? Where is that house located and I started explaining, and I told him exactly what happened, how I knocked the gate and how ran away by catching the bus late evening. And, the shopkeeper assured the justice and said, told me not to worry.

The shopkeeper asked me if I had any document where my father's name was written? I opened my polybag and showed him my tenth and twelfth grade's mark sheets. And the shopkeeper photocopied those marksheets and kept with him for future reference to let someone know who could help me in this matter. Shopkeeper's voice was heavy, as he was being heard outside the shop, when a few more old men started gathering there. And shopkeeper made every one aware by introducing me, a lot of compassion and sympathy started flowing towards me.

And then a few people asked me, what is your mother's name? I told them my mother's name is Smt. Sudarshan Rani. All the old men gathered there decided to go with me in that house and now they knew who mistreated me, they all together taken me to the same house even though I had not told them about the location. Since they were the inhabitants of this village, so they already knew about the story of that man and the old woman. I started getting afraid that the man in that house was



using vulgar slangs and would hit me as he had already come so close to scare me.

Now, a group of old men who were gathered there in the shop escorted me in the same house where I was mistreated. As we entered the house this time that man (Probably my father) was very polite to the group of old men, and he did not say a word to me. And they asked Mohan Krishan, do you know this boy who is he? He remained silent and then that old woman who was worshipping an idol in the kitchen came out and saw people gathered there; she covered her head and sat down along with her son. And she was asked the same question, Ravello, do you know who this boy is? She started crying loudly and said this boy is my grandson and the moment she expressed that I started crying and one man hugged me and said, don't worry, we are with you.

Now I came to know the man who mistreated me was my father, and I kept staring at his face while he was responding to the old men talks, I was looking at his eye movements; he unhappy he was to see me and how he was not making any eye contact with me. And then an old man asked him, Mohan Krishan, do you know who this boy is? He replied, he doesn't know, then he got a firm slap from that old man, and then he asked him again, do you know who is he? He started, yelling saying if he wants to live here, he needs to bring his mother back with him then only he will allow me to stay or he won't, that moment I came to know that he is my father and that moment was so painful because my father was fixing a deal with his son, and son wanted his arms around him and on top of I had a grandmother too, my heart wrenched badly, every time I think of that moment my heart cries and soul gets restless.

Then, Godfather and all the old men who were there at that moment, told my grandmother and father that he is a brilliant student, and you should be proud of him and he is preparing for M.B.B.S. an Examination and he wants to become a doctor, and he needs your help, you have to help him to get the Permanent Resident Certificate of Jammu and Kashmir as he is your son and grandson. Then we all left my father's house, and then all the villagers said, we are proud of you Neeraj, you will make the name of this village and make us all proud if you become a doctor. And I thanked them for their support, and I said, I will not let them down in any way and will work hard. And we left the house, and then grandmother was urging me to stay, and I said I have to prepare for examination, this was the first time when I had seen my father and grandmother when I was 17 years old.

Next day, I visited my father and grandmother alone. As I reached near the gate, I saw there was smoke coming from the bonfire as something was being cooked. I knocked the gate before getting inside the house, no one came out or answered, so I slowly opened the gate and calling Papa, Papa, I was still scared yet calling him with respect and I could only hear my voice. And all of sudden father stepped down from a Jujube tree which was in the right corner of the yard, he said no one is at home; I asked him. How was he doing? And he replied, whatever you are looking for I have nothing for you, and you will not get it.

I mildly expressed my concerns, needs, aim and asked for help because I wanted to study further to become a doctor. He said, come after a few days because he claimed that wasn't feeling well and yet failed to understand that how could a man climb up the tree being unwell. However, I considered what he said to me and told him that I will come after a few days, please

Papa arranges that document for me, I need it badly; I begged for his support; I needed nothing but his support to get me that document because only with father's consent it was possible.

And as I was about to leave, I saw my grandmother coming from the highway and I started waiting for her, so I can touch her feet and ask her, how was she doing? And, from behind, father was telling me, what are you standing here? Anyhow I waited for grandmother, as she entered the gate, I touched her feet and she asked me, how was I doing? I said, I am doing well, but I need that document for my education, please tell your son to please help me get it, all he needed to do is a signature.

Grandmother insisted on me to stay for a little while as she wanted to prepare tea for me. And, then suddenly, she said, there is no sugar, and told me she must bring it from her daughter's house, then I came to know that my father has a sister too, who was living at one-minute north. I was waiting for grandmother to return, and father started smoking a cigarette and I felt bad, and I asked, Papa why do you smoke, you know smoking tobacco is bad for your health and he yelled at me and told me to mind my business.

After some time, Grandmother returned with four people; two men and two women but without sugar, and I asked grandmother, you went to get sugar, did you get it? And she replied that she remembered that she has sugar in the kitchen which she couldn't recall because of her weak memory. And then those four people were father's sister and her husband, father's sister's son and her daughter-in-law. Those people were looking at me with an unhappy face, sort of cursing with eyes and after glancing me, they started staring me as if I had committed a crime or stole something from them.

And, after a few minutes, father's sister asked me rudely, so for what have you come here after so many years? Where is your bitch mother? Maybe your mother has sent you here to get the property, right? I did not know what she was talking about, and why was she talking about mother and property? For the first time I felt like I was in an interrogation chamber, like I had committed some huge crime, and I was responsible for their upset moods and unhappiness.

I replied, no, I am not sent by my mother to get the property; I am here because I need help from my father. And, she started yelling at me, where were you before? All life your father has been living alone and now you have come here for property and desert the father. I was stating my obvious intentions that I have come here because I need a Permanent Resident Certificate to take part in the Common Entrance Test so that I can secure my position to become a doctor. Then father and his sister started taking each other's consent and his sister was inducing fear in him that do if you want to, do not take risk because once you give them permanent certificate, he will become a legal heir of your property and he will also sell the property and run away. She successfully induced the fear in my father's mind. And then my father uttered that he needs to have a conversation with his elder brother.

As they were talking to each other, the number of people who I had to confront was getting multiplied, I was the only one and they were plenty of people. Whenever they would talk, they would talk all in one tone and try to create deterrence so that I stop asking for what I wanted. And that is how I came to know that father has an elder brother too. I requested grandmother that please, tell your son to help me. All he needed to give his permanent certificate's photocopy and my job would have been a lot easier. Grandmother refused to help, and then I



begged to get the address of my father's elder brother's home address where I can go and ask for help.

After so many requests, father's sister gave me her elder brother's name and address, father's elder brother's name was Saiye Dass while giving me the address, grandmother tried to stop her daughter (Sita Devi) not to give me the address and then she told her mother don't worry she will talk to her brother Saiye Dass over the phone. And told me to visit him and he will help you; he is the one who takes all the decisions in our family, and I was in so much chaos and I begged that please help me get the Permanent Resident Certificate to make advances in my career, but they baffled with my presence and determination to get the desired document.

Those all people in the family were humiliating me, I could never have to understand, why they were pushing me away, well they were certainly treating me like trash. They were making me feel that I made an enormous mistake coming there, not even a single person was listening to what I was saying but forcing their ways over me to get rid of. I was requesting grandmother that please, do something all over again and she remained silent all this time and I felt maybe those other people are not letting her speak. And, they were hurting me, but I was resisting by focusing on the document I needed. But things were not in my favor at all.

After sometime, my grandmother broken her silence and released her arrows of hate and curse saying, bring your mother here then we would allow you to stay here, when your mother would live here then you can get the permanent certificate and now it was another challenge, I sensed that they will waste my time and won't give me anything and I would lose my chance to take part in the common entrance test.



I got scared of being alone and these people were hovering over me like hungry eagles. I decided to ask for help; I went to the town and wanted to meet someone who would help me; I called the Godfather and briefed him about the situation and then he guided me to approach the sarpanch of the village, and I went to a barber shop and asked the barber. Where does sarpanch live or how can I meet him? Anyone who saw me for the first time, asked me the questions in curiosity regarding my introduction. After meeting several people, another shopkeeper told me that Sarpanch sits under the banyan tree, that shopkeeper directed me pointing his finger on the sarpanch and told me he is sipping tea and reading newspaper there wearing white dress.

And finally, I met the Sarpanch of the village under the Banyan tree near the tea stall, where a lot of other people were also gathered. I introduced myself and who my parents are; I lived in an orphanage, and I need your help; I explained everything to the Sarpanch, especially the necessity to get permanent resident certificate of Jammu and Kashmir and which was only possible if father would have stepped forward to help me. All people sitting under the Banyan tree were listening to my problems and many people sitting there showed interest to help me.

One old man, the tea stall runner, stepped forward and told other men; let us go there at Mohan Krishan's house and help this boy, parents are responsible for their children's lives, how can his father abandon him? And they came along with me at my father's house, and a father saw many people coming his way; he ran away to the town to remain out of the mess. Then people who went along with me, pressurized grandmother and asked her, what kind of grandmother are you? People who don't have kids they beg and pray to have one, and you have a

grandson who is intelligent he wants your help, what are you trying to achieve deserting this boy? What would you get out of it? Then Grandmother replied that she is illiterate and knows nothing, she will have to take help of her elder son.

And they scheduled next day meeting at my father's house and people of the village said, you live in your father's house for a day, because you have to pay bus fare every day and how would you manage? It was a relief that all the old people were with me, and thinking of that now my father and grandmother would at least allow me to stay there for a while; I told people that I need to have my books with me so I can study at night and they said get your books, and If you face any issues, let us know, we will sign the witnesses to help you get the permanent resident certificate.

Then Sarpanch of the Village suggested me to get a letter written by a Petitioner Writer who used to sit in the Sub-district of my village Jakh, I took some help in terms of money from Godfather, and he said take the money and go there and get the application done, a very short time left and you have to submit the Permanent Resident Certificate before issuing admit cards for the Common Entrance Tests get closed, now I was restless and impatient, a thought was on my mind if I can make grandmother and father understand that my need was genuine and I did not come to take property or anything to harm them, my only consent was to ask for help to get the desired document, I thought if my father and grandmother agree to my statement then it will be the fastest way to get the document before the deadline and I came home and in an appropriate manner I expressed my need and concerns and made them understand that how crucial was the document.

And, in the meantime, grandmother's daughter Sita Devi and her husband with children and father's elder brother Saiye Dass and his wife Rani Devi, all of those people came there suddenly which I understood at the first instance that, they are conspiring against me to block my path to get my things done as they all were in the fear of losing property because I would have not gotten back to my house, all of this property would have been in the name of the Sita Devi and her family members.

Now I had understood that what they were talking about and why no one was favoring me and they kept a challenge to me, you first get your mother here because of your mother your father has gone crazy and he won't let them help me have the desired document and then I spoke to them that if you want to help me, please sign the affidavit that I gotten typed from the petition writer sworn in front of first class magistrate of sub-district revenue department on the guidelines of the sarpanch.

As I showed that affidavit requesting them that if you will sign this document of witness that I am the son of Mohan Krishan, I would at least get something to be eligible to take part in the upcoming examination and they said show us your identity card, I showed them my identity card and they saw Mohan Krishan name was mentioned on it as my father, then father snatched the affidavit and tore in front of me, and said, you are trying to be over-smart and trying to get the property.

After witnessing the letter turning into pieces, I started crying and screaming to express the pain by feeling helpless. Seeing me crying grandmother said don't cry, your father is suffering from mental illness, there is no medicine for him, and he does all this unknowingly. But she warned me that until your mother doesn't come back to this family, your father will never help you. After discovering the dark sides of their hearts, the

circumstances I was muddled into chaos and the way they have been humiliating me since they saw me. I understood that they are standing all six -seven people in a group hurting me and keeping me away from my rights and I fought all alone with these monsters.

I could never forget that merciless battering when I was begging on my knees, with the tears in my eyes, for a help just because I wanted to continue my studies. I had my vision set and determined to become a doctor and they laughed at me while I was crying, making fun of my vulnerability, and said, you won't get anything neither the document nor property.

I did not understand what my parents did and who was right or wrong; I needed that Permanent Resident Certificate badly; it was the only document that could have helped me to take part in the exam. I got very depressed; it seemed to me that I have no value or good for nothing, so these people will always treat me this way. So, I decided to go far- far away from these people called themselves my relatives; I wanted to get freedom from all this suffocation and the troubles I had been going through. And then I told them I will go in the town and get the letter written again, please don't tear it. They were laughing and said, bring it. As I turned back, I heard Sita Devi telling my father and grandmother, don't you dare to sign the document or thumb impression.

But this time I did not want to get the affidavit written, and I went to the chemist shop in the village and asked for sleeping pills, and Chemist denied and then I asked if the chemist had Cyanide? Chemist raised his eyebrows, I said, I want cyanide to conduct an experiment and the chemist again denied it. I couldn't hide anymore so I bluntly told him I want to end my life please give me the cyanide or anything poisonous which will



help me get over from these troubles I was going through, and he said, we don't have those things whichever you are asking for.

I had lost hope of getting the document and I could see myself drowning into the river of pain where my father and all other people were acting like crocodiles, who were ready to kill me before I could try to swim. And I decided to end my life rather to be eaten by these crocodiles. After I was refused for the poison, I said that chemist, no one is helping me, so my mind thought a quick way to terminate myself was to jump under the lorries passing by the road, and I was so hopeless that my mind decided that lorry would be an easy way to jump under.

And, I started running toward the highway and then I walked a little farther from the town so that even if I get hit by the lorry and still survive, no one could take me to the hospital, I wanted to end my life as I was so sick of explaining my issues and troubles to everyone in the family and they made fun of my situation and circumstances I was in. When I saw the lorry coming which was heavily loaded, I ran toward the lorry in the center of the road. And suddenly a man came from behind on the motorcycle and slapped me hard and dragged me away from the road. He yelled at me and asked, what were you going to do? Why are you killing yourself? I told him the reason and begged that please let me end my life. He escorted me among old people in the village, and that is how that man saved my life.

And, in no time, the news of Mohan Krishan's son was attempting suicide flared up in the village and, everyone was asking me questions and the reasons behind my suicidal attempts, a lot of older men wanted to help to save my life. I



told them that people in the family are laughing at me and they turned the affidavit into pieces; the villagers told me to get the witness letter written again and we will call the Deputy Commissioner of the district because Sarpanch has powers to take such big decisions if needed. And then they escorted me to my home and warned grandmother and father if you tried to harm this child, all of you would be put behind the bars, and told me to sleep in the house.

Next morning, I woke up early in the morning and started getting ready to go to the office of the sub-district magistrate to get the affidavit written again. As I started pumping the water out from the well, father came from behind and slapped me, shouting at me, don't touch the hand-pump, this is not installed by your mother, and go to your original father, you are not my son; I started crying but; I had no time to cry to, so wiped my tears, caught the bus and headed to the sub-district office.

As I stepped down from the bus, I asked an old man standing at the entrance of the district office. Is there any water tank? I told him that there are some dirt particles in my eyes; I needed to wash my eyes. In reality, I was hiding the fact that I had not taken a shower and did not want to let anyone know this because of insecurity; but that wasn't my intention, I couldn't take a shower because my father abused me, and I got scared as I did not want to get late for this affidavit writing. So, that old man guided me the way to the water tank, as I saw the water tank, I turned so happy and quickly washed my face and soaked my hair a little to comb it nicely to look good, because I was going to get a new affidavit written.

After I washed my face, district office started functioning after an hour, so I went to the petitioner writer for the affidavit, he kind of reacted that he had written that affidavit a day ago and

now you have come for the same. Have you lost it or what? I told him, that my father torn it apart, he said, they could jail your father for this, I said, right now I want this document signed by some witnesses in Panchayat and would be good to go. I got the same affidavit written; typist told me to get it marked by Tahsildar.

As I went to the Tahsildar's office, a peon was standing outside the office, he told me to wait, some meeting is going on, I sort of impatiently requested that please get it signed by the officer and then I would go and get this document signed by the villagers as witnesses. Tahsildar probably heard me requesting the peon to get early access, so he told the peon to let me in. I touched his feet, because I was taught to touch feet of people in the orphanage as a sign of respect. He did not bless me but asked about me.

I introduced myself and told him about the need of the permanent resident certificate for upcoming Common Entrance Test; coincidentally his son was also preparing for the same examination; so, he assured me that he would do my work but as a legal formality, he would have to verify my location and details before issuing the permanent resident certificate.

And he asked me to verify the location of my residence and witnesses for the relation of a father and child between me and my father. He signed the document and told me to get back to him the next day with the names and addresses of the four witnesses with their signatures behind the affidavit. After getting the document signed by Tahsildar, I handed over that document to the Sarpanch and he said, Neeraj, do not worry, you go home and rest now, I would get the signature of the witnesses on the affidavit, Sarpanch also assures me that he would do it speedily as he was aware of the urgency.

Next morning without wasting time, I went to the town and got the signed affidavit and thanked sarpanch for his efforts and help and moved to the district office for further procedure. While traveling to the district office, I was feeling so happy that, at least some progress has been made, I firmly believed that things are hard in the start, and I could only understand right after first step was taken this signed document was the first step to my next step.

Within half an hour, I arrived at the district office and presented the required document before Tahsildar and he said, I have verified your details. And, just to make you aware of the process to get the Permanent Resident Certificate is long. And it can't be issued just in a week or two, it takes a month to verify all the details. Then, Tahsildar told me he knows the need of this document to appear in the Medical Common Entrance Test for M.B.B.S. and I was requesting him that please issue it on a priority basis, it is crucial for me, and I need it within a day or two and only then I would be eligible able to take part in the examination.

After acknowledging my concerns, Tahsildar explained to me the legalities by emphasizing the subject that the procedure of issuing Permanent Resident Certificate is a lengthy process and it is only issued after a strong verification. I was I overreacted and started crying there and begged that please help me, and he said see you are an intelligent boy, and we are helping you by issuing an under-processing document which states that you are eligible for Permanent Resident of Jammu and Kashmir and yet this verification needs to take its own course.

Although on compassionate grounds since you have verified your location and the witnesses, I would consider your matter as a special case. I am signing this document which states that

your permanent resident certificated would be issued to you in some time. Tahsildar gave me an authentication by issuing an Under Process Certificate. And Tahsildar also told me he wanted to help, and he had a conversation with some officer to issue under process certificate. There would be so many other students with the same problem. All you must do is to produce this under processing certificate at the time of issuance of admission cards for the respective Common Entrance Test. Tahsildar told me that is what he could have done maximum in the short period. He assured me that I would not face any trouble getting admission card for the subjective examination and we wish you all the very best.

After issuing me the under process certificate for the permanent resident certificate, Tahsildar told me he would visit my father's house and be there by the time we come there, and I asked him at what time he would be there and he said, we don't tell that to anyone, make sure you are available at the time of verification I thanked him and made a call to Godfather and told him about the proceedings, he said, well done, Neeraj! Next day Godfather told me to visit him tomorrow morning before eight O'clock and then he would accompany me to get my admission card and then you will easily take part in this examination.

And now, finally, I was very happy that I would be able to take part in entrance exam. After getting admit Card I also told the Godfather that First Class Magistrate had told me to be available at your father's residence so that verification could be completed, and they also require a few witnesses for the same. And Godfather told me that you should stay at your father's house for some days until your physical verifications gets done.



Now, I had the admission card which made me so excited and boosted my confidence level and made me more positive of doing good in the exams; I was enthusiastic and very positive that now everything would be good. I arrived at my father's residence in the afternoon and saw grandmother was alone cooking something. As it is, I was happy so; I touched my grandmother's feet, and she warmly said, sit and she asked me if I was hungry and wanted something to eat? I felt loved and cared for a while, so I sat down, and she gave me some rice with potato Gravy and said, eat; she placed a glass of water around my plate too.

While I was eating, she asked me, how come you are here? I replied, I want to stay for two days with you so that the verification of the Permanent Certificate is done. She probably did not understand exactly. So, she said, you eat, I will get some vegetables from my daughter's house and as she left; I was all alone in the house and a feeling of insecurity came and because someone passed through the fence was staring at me and asked me who are you? I replied, I am the son of Mohan Krishan and that person looked at me and moved on.

And, after a few minutes my grandmother with her daughter Sita Devi and her husband came along with grandmother and started asking me, what people are coming to verify what? I told them about the verification for the Permanent Resident Certificate, they may need signature of Grandmother, and father, after that it would be a lot easier for me to get the document, And then grandmother's daughter yelled at her mother and said, I told you not to allow this boy in the house and you are showing your love and giving him food, tell him to come with his mother, tell him to get the document from his mother.



I left my half-eaten food after hearing Sita Devi cursing me; I told grandmother that I am sleepy and getting into the room to sleep. But I was very much hurt because of the ongoing conversation and their conspiracies to block me to get the document. In my heart it was like that I already had gotten the admit card but I did not share with anyone, but I had carried a small briefcase which was given to me by Godfather to carry important documents, I had locked the briefcase.

After I got into the room, I closed my eyes to pretend as I was sleeping, but I could exactly hear everything what these people were designing to harm me and lock me up into the room. I was overthinking of the 'before and after' consequences of the ongoing process of me getting the Permanent Resident Certificate. I fell asleep and then the sunrays started coming through the window woke me up and I started feeling restless, and then I went out of the house to see if those people were there.

I was getting impatient as the time was near; I was waiting for the physical verification. I started moving out and coming back to make sure that I don't miss the verification. I was getting anxious, ; I wanted this verification to go as smooth as possible, I literally did not want these people creating anymore troubles for me.

As I was getting in and out waiting for the verification, my movements irritated my grandmother and she asked, why are you moving in and out? Stay in the house she shouted, I told her, today the physical verifications and witnesses will be done, and the First-Class Magistrate may visit at any time, So, that is why I am moving in and out so that I don't miss a chance. I thought she would keep getting irritated, so it's better to wait outside, so I stood outside the house and after half an hour I

saw the First-Class Magistrate stepping down from the car and got into the grocery shop across the road probably that person was familiar to him.

As I saw him, I immediately crossed the road and touched his feet, while the shopkeeper and the magistrate were shaking hands and asking each other about health. And then that shopkeeper asked the First-Class Magistrate, how come you are here today? Magistrate told the shopkeeper that this boy, he says his father is not signing the documents for the Permanent Resident Certificate, so he had come in my office yesterday with the document where many people from the village had witnessed that they know him that he is the son of Mohan Krishan.

Then the shopkeeper started sharing something about my father with the First-Class Magistrate and I was told to bring the documents needed to be signed and verified at the spot. I rushed into my room where I had stayed in the father's house and I started unlocking my briefcase to get those documents out for signatures, while I was doing that, I saw grandmother coming toward me. She came close, distracted me and started cursing using vulgar slangs and tried to lock the room and fortunately I held the door back before it would have shut completely.

Luckily, I ruined her chance to lock me in the room, as I spontaneously reacted to the situation pushing her mildly away so that she didn't get hurt and moved out with the required documents before the Magistrate. I also reported to the Magistrate, that how grandmother had almost locked me in the house, and I somehow got out. It shocked them that how an old woman could do this with her grandson. I got scared from the accident that was about to take place; I saved myself from

being locked in the room. The wonderful thing was that I did not get locked in the room and grandmother did not get hurt was the best thing. Because she was old, and if she would have gotten hurt, people would have called me rogue and beaten by if she would have gotten hurt. I was so fortunate that nothing happened that would have put me into a big trouble.

Above all, I was extremely happy about the papers which were now signed and I had to keep them in the safe custody, I also raised concerns that I am scared that either father or grandmother will snatch the papers and discard it, then Magistrate and the shopkeeper went to my house with me and warned grandmother and my father that if his documents are lost or damaged, you would be held accountable. After they were warned by the authorities, I felt safe and easy to get back in my room.

And, after a few days; now the time had come for what I had been fighting and struggling for so long i.e. to appear in the examination. I was very excited that I would take part in the examination. I got ready and as I was about to leave the house; I wanted to make sure I had everything, especially the admission card. I opened my documents' stack and couldn't find the admission card and started doubting myself that where did I forget it; I had kept it in there, and I searched everything and everywhere I couldn't find it; I asked my grandmother and father if they know where my admit card is, and they yelled at me and said, we are not thieves and then I called the godfather and updated him that I lost the admit card; I explained to him that before shower I had kept it in the briefcase it and after shower I couldn't find it anywhere, then godfather told me that your exam will get started after 10 O'clock, he said, if you find your admit card, call me so that I will leave my house and wait for you at the examination venue.

I felt so embarrassed to inform this to godfather about the loss of the admission card, but I remained honest, I would have never lost it any cost, I knew either my father or grandmother stole it. I felt so low because Godfather did maximum he could have done and tried hard to help me, but my parents and family tried even harder to stop me getting up because they were happy to see me dusted, that is how I lost the only opportunity and seen myself into the pieces of shattered hope. I cried tears of blood and couldn't forget how they never resisted to hurt me. I wish I were orphan.

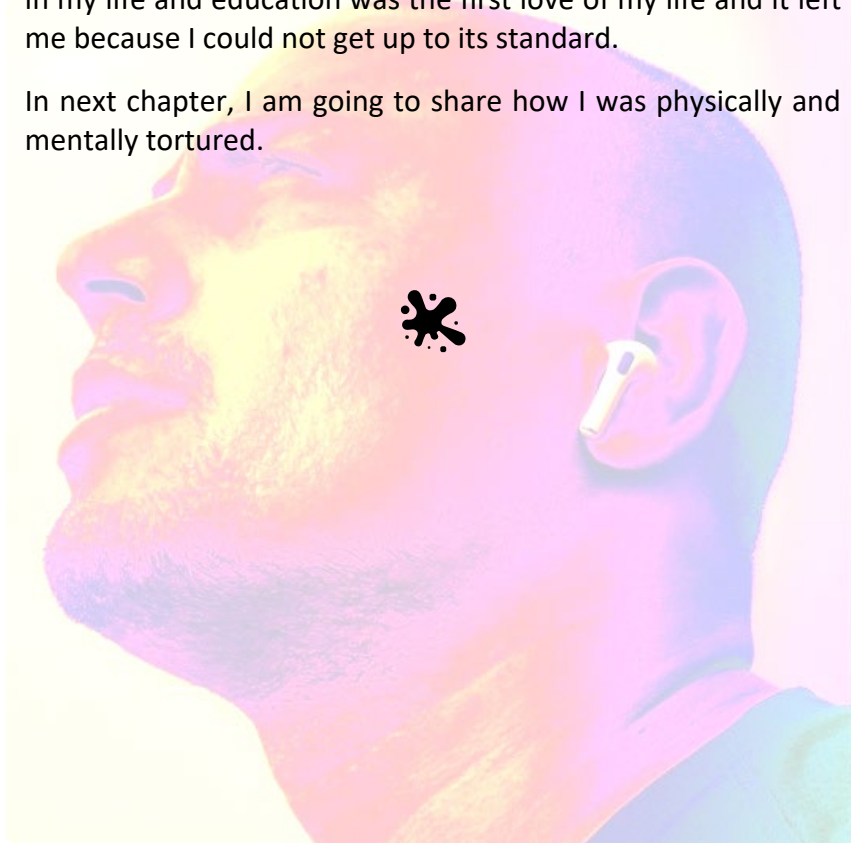
Next day, I called Godfather and expressed how embarrassed and low I was feeling because of how I got the admission card and couldn't take advantage. I explained to Godfather it's mischievously done either by my father or grandmother. He told me he is aware of that you have not done it intentionally. Your people were not ready to help you in the first place, so they took advantage to desert you. I again thanked Godfather for understanding me and having faith in me. But, Godfather said, Neeraj, opportunity is lost and now get your Permanent Resident Certificate.

Godfather firmly warned me and reminded me that Neeraj your permanent resident certificate is already in the process. Then he called some of his contacts and told me to go to the Revenue Department and meet Patwari and finish what you have started. Next day I went to the Patwari Office and then District Magistrate's Office where there was one verification pending because I did not know that I had to sign a document after the verification process is over. I was not aware how to finish it. I expected that it would get delivered to me.

Next day I went to the District Magistrate's Office to sign the document, then concerned officer asked my name, father's

name, grandfather's name, the caste that I belong to and then I signed the document and thanked the officer. And I was so happy that I finally received my Permanent Resident Certificate. But not being able to take part in my exam and how my parents and relatives played a brutal role to dust me off, this was the worst and most excruciating shock I had ever received in my life and education was the first love of my life and it left me because I could not get up to its standard.

In next chapter, I am going to share how I was physically and mentally tortured.





## WRETCHEDNESS



Now my life was in a different way, a more realistic way than ever before and more brutal than my imagination. The thoughts of a warm welcome by parents and me being supported started diminishing to the scraps.

I had a notion that my father would support me; I had thought that my father would give me a warm tight hug and would cherish my presence, everything started flipping to the dark side, I had a vision that I would become a doctor and my father would be proud of me and sooner I realized there was worst to come.

But the reality was different, I was totally in a constricting and suffocating environment. The Ambiance of my father's house was full of negativity and stony hearts so unlike the people living in it. I was wounded badly expecting some mercy, some love, some care, and a bit of support to move ahead in my life

to fully enjoy the taste of their parenthood. But instead of compassion, the aversion in my father's eyes was the diversion which led me into a well of excruciating experiments and it made me feel like a rotten sample on the slide of a laboratory which was being tested again and again to see the capacity of bearing the pain, how determined I had the will to survive.

I mended my wounds, hidden my scars, brought my wandering mind to a focus and watered my restless soul at peace and tried to align myself in such a way with all my sincerity and efforts where I could win the hearts of my father and grandmother. I had read somewhere in the magazines or newspapers that love can conquer anything and everything, but in my case, I was very unfortunate that I was naïve to know the word and to feel the intensity of love. Anyone truly where the thread of this word love would have showed an unbreakable bond to ease my pain had never loved me. Even being old enough to sense and understand things I was still new to the blood relations. I never felt or seen happiness in the eyes of my grandmother or father, their eyes were full of aversion ever since I entered the house, but I could sense the supply of that hate coming through my paternal aunt and uncle along with their family.

Even though, I was aware of the fact that they hated me, I could easily see the greed from their vision, sensed unhappiness from their voices, and the movements they started making after I was discerned in the desert starving for love but not the water and food, I needed love, a sincere touch, sincere hug, sincere and compassionate vision and sounds, but later I realized I was expecting it from the wrong people who were biologically right people of my life.

Days went, I was at least getting the cooked food from grandmother when she used to cook for my father; she was

giving me food not with love but in the fear of what people of the village would think of her what kind of grandmother is she; she used to say these words. But I would pity on those old hands full of wrinkles, that I would extend my arms and ask her if I can do certain things that she used to do, I would break the dried branches she had gathered from her backyard to cook the food, she would wash utensils with the ash, I could understand their schedule and I made myself useful to them by sacrificing my time when I knew I was being degraded in every aspect of life.

My father had a baby buffalo, he would feed grass, water several times a day, talk to that buffalo; I could see he was more connected to the animal than his own son, maybe because he expected milk from the buffalo. One thing I saw good about his behavior that at least he was compassionate to the animal; I saw maybe there is a space of love in his heart; I thought I should ignite his heart so that love can grow and flow through his mind and soul.

I started inquiring about his likes and dislikes from grandmother, all the time she would cook, I would sit near the bonfire and break the dried branches to fuel the fire, would blow air to soar the flames, and would try to make grandmother smile by acting stupid. I was so helpless that I was learning, asking, so many things at a time to be able to at least to get accepted by my father. A lot of times, when I would hand-pump the water through the well and fill the bucket, my father would not drink that water and even would not eat the food which was cooked with the same water that I had filled, like I was untouchable. Every time I would go out of the house and come back, my grandmother would say don't touch anything, take a shower.

All day, I would go out in the field and cut the grass, tie it in the sheet and bring it home for the baby buffalo with one thought, that my father likes the baby buffalo and if he would see me bringing grass for her, maybe my father would feel something good in his heart, maybe he would feel that I am available and visible to his blind eyes, maybe he would see my efforts to his insensitive eyes. Whenever I would see my grandmother cleaning the yard with a broom, I would ask her if I could do it, she started accepting my helping hands but within limits, like he would not let me clean the kitchen area, area around the water pump because she hadn't accepted me, I would take shower and tell grandmother, I have taken a shower and now I am clean and she would allow me to at least step into the kitchen, and would say don't touch any utensils or any of the things. I was doing things their ways to get accepted.

After tolerating me uncomfortably for a couple of days, father lost his patience and started forcing me to leave the house and vacate the room where I was staying in their house, grandmother condemned father's behavior and told him not to treat me like the way he was treating me, probably my grandmother's heart was melting with my efforts, maybe she started feeling that it was okay to get some support, or maybe some sort of comfort she was getting through me, maybe she had started treating me like her grandson. I was using my imagination and would make efforts to win their hearts and confidence.

Whenever my paternal aunt Sita Devi and her husband would visit my grandmother, she would ask my grandmother, if I have been acting suspiciously or did, I ask for anymore documents or anything, or anywhere if I went anywhere, but keeping all those things aside, I would put myself into their shoes and would try my best to co-operate in the harsh conditions. I would touch

their feet to receive their blessings as every child in India is taught to touch the feet of elders, because it is said that there is heaven under the feet of parents. Honestly, I have never seen anything like heaven under or above the feet; I remember those feet kicking me and as if I was football to them.

One night my father's head started aching after he finished his dinner, spinning with the smoke of a burning cigarette, he was screaming, and my grandmother came onto the roof where I used to sleep at night. She woke me up saying, get up your father is angry, would you apply some heated sesame-oil on his head and massage his feet; he is asking for head massage, and she couldn't do it because of lack of her strength. I agreed because I never wanted to lose this opportunity to be one step closer to his mind. I went downstairs and saw him lying on the cot.

He was in extreme pain, as I approached him and asked him, Papa, raise your head and keep it on the pillow and he used some vulgar slangs and told me to leave the house, but I knew he was in the pain. I looked at grandmother and told her I am afraid that he may hit me if I touched him, grandmother said, do it or he will get more violent, I couldn't understand what to do and I did it anyway by raising the force of my will, I was ready to bear even if he would have hit me massaging his head because I did not want to see him in pain because he was my father.

And I took the slightly heated sesame-oil from grandmother's hand and started applying onto his scalp circling through the hair strands and this was the very first time I had touched my father. When I touched him, a sense of bond was there, I was smiling with happiness and then grandmother also smiled and



said do it; I massaged his head, oiled his scalp, and comforted him until he fell asleep.

I went back onto the roof and slept there; it started raining after a while, I got into the room next to my father's room where I was staying and slept there. Next thing I remember; I was sleeping soundly with the mild comfort of cold and the mesmerizing smell of earth as it was raining, probably it was the first rain of the season.

After some time, while I was asleep I felt some shadow hovering me and as I opened my eyes, my father choked me with his forceful hands, slapped me and said I would kill you, you have been dancing here and there a lot for so many days; you think you can snatch this property; you think you will live with me; you want to steal money, I won't leave you alive, he spoke all these words in a less than fifteen seconds, and to protect myself, I had to kick in his chest and ran away from the house as it was almost early morning. I was so scared that my mind was building up so many negative thoughts; it scared me that I had kicked my father in the chest what if he gets sick or tells his sister and grandmother that I kicked him, they won't believe in me that I had experienced after my father tried to kill me.

I was so restless that I was shocked, numbed, horrified because of the thoughts that my father wanted to kill me, and he tried it too? No one would ever believe if I had told anyone, so I decided to keep my mouth shut and ran away in the early morning before the sunrise.

I was afraid that he would run after me, what if catches me and kill me with some weapon, because I remembered he had a sword in the room, I glanced it once while passing by his door, when he was counting the cash. I ran away almost half a mile

so, he cannot spot me; I signaled for help to take a lift, one truck stopped, and I said I don't have money and I need to go to the temple that is a few miles away south and the driver said, get in over.

I was sweating like a lunatic, and the driver understood that I had run away from somewhere. He questioned me if I had stolen anything or killed anyone; I said no; I started crying when he forced me to tell him that why I wanted a ride? And then driver started asking me my name, my father's name and what does my father do, where do I live, what's my education. I answered all his questions, and the driver said what temple you want to go as he saw a big temple was nearby; he said in what area is it and I did not understand what temple, where was what, so I told him I wanted to run away from my home, or my father and his relatives would kill me. I asked him if he could get me a job somewhere.

I asked the driver where was he going? He replied, first he will go to Delhi and then Mumbai. I started getting easy with the driver and asked him what's loaded in this truck? He told me that he was carrying a few tons of Gypsum. And, as I heard the word Gypsum, I started telling him I know how Gypsum looks like; I have used Gypsum in the chemistry laboratory and if you heat it at a certain temperature, it will become Plaster of Paris and he was shockingly amazed because he was a driver but he said, the area in Mumbai where it is being transported is actually a factory of Plaster of Paris.

And suddenly, driver asked me, would you work with me? And with no other thoughts, I nodded yes, I will work with you. I asked the driver; Would you give me good food, clothes to wear, and money to spend, I will do everything, I am strong. He said, sometimes we need to change the tires too, I said I would

learn from you and do it if you will teach me how I can do anything. He halted his truck at a Dhaba (a roadside food-hub) and told me to lock the door and we stepped down. He ordered two cups of Indian tea and rusks. And he said he would come back in a minute, make sure houseflies don't fall into the tea and he left.

I was sipping tea while looking here and there, and the driver came back on the table with a blue polythene bag that had a sort of powder in it. He called the waiter and told him to get a glass of water, and then he added two spoons of that powder in water and gulped it. In a quick time, a few more trucks came there, and drivers came to him, and he ordered more chairs. They sat around the table and started talking in Punjabi language and they were talking about prostitutes and at what prices they get them; I felt so disgusted and trapped. And a fear started hovering over me, as I started losing the taste of tea.

Now it was getting dark, so I decided that it is the right time for me to run away, and I was making sure to run faster as he is unable to see me; before I might get into any kind of trouble, I asked the driver who had driven me there, where is the washroom? He said, go where the parking ends and I saw a lot of broken bottles of different colors, and I was looking back if he is watching see me. And I saw a bike coming toward me and got scared like if he is the driver, when the bike was at some visible, I understood he is someone else not the driver and with a little distance I signaled him for the lift telling him that I lost my wallet a few kilometers back and he gave me a ride.

After five minutes of the ride. I told the man who had given me a ride. I asked him. How far was the police station from there? And he replied, just a couple of minutes ago, north. He asked, should I drop you there? And I replied, yes, please! He dropped

me near the police check post, and I thanked him. Even though I was far beyond the reach of that driver I was still afraid of being seen by that driver, now I was hiding from him because he was talking about prostitutes and that thunderous laughter when they were talking about prostitutes.

As I reached near the police check post and asked the policeman standing there, how far the village Jakh is from here? He said, there is no village Jakh here, where are you from? I said, I am from Jammu and Kashmir, and I live in the village Jakh. The policeman said you are in Punjab, and it horrified me. The policeman asked, how did you get here? And I told the policeman the entire story, and they inquired about me and my family and how I ran away from home? It made me feel disgusted and now I wanted to arrive home before it was too late.

The policeman took me to his senior officer; I was shaking that policemen would put me in the jail because I was naïve how things work in the police stations, I only understood police means you will end up in the jail. The senior police officer asked me about the situation that led me in their Punjab state, and I explained the whole story, how my father tried to kill me and how I caught the truck and why I wanted to go home.

And the policeman said that Neeraj you were lucky enough to reach the police station for help otherwise a couple of days ago, two children were kidnapped, and their dead bodies were found behind the bushes. I started crying, I said, I want to go home, and they said, they will help me. They stopped a load carrier, noted down the vehicle's license number, and gave me a helpline number i.e., 100 on a paper and said if you are in any kind of problem, call from any telephone booth on this helpline number and wherever you are, police would reach you for

help. I thanked the police officer and touched everyone's feet as expressing my gratitude and sat in that load carrier.

While traveling with this new driver of load carrier, he also asked me the same questions; where I live, who am I, what happened to me, how come I was there in the police station, and I explained to him to what I explained to the police officers. The driver said that senior police officer was his relative, and he was going to Jammu to meet his relatives. I asked him where and what about the location he was going to? He replied, Jammu City. I smiled and said, I know that location very well.

And that is how I established a common ground with this new driver, then he pulled over his vehicle and bought me a packet of juice and said drink it. I drank the juice and thanked him for his courtesy. After two hours ago, we arrived at the border of Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir states. He showed me the border and explained how these two states Jammu and Kashmir and Punjab share its border. He said you are very lucky who is coming back otherwise people who run away in the trucks never come back, either they get sold or killed. I thanked him for the juice and drive.

Now we had already entered the Jammu and Kashmir state and after traveling around forty miles, the next district was mine; driver asked me, where do you want to get dropped? I said near the pond that is where my village is, he said, he knows a couple of people there in my village. He asked me, where do you live exactly? I got afraid what if he remembers my location, next time he would stop by and might tell villagers or his known persons that I had facilitated this boy, picked him from the police station.



I started overthinking about him, and by understanding me running away from home in a truck, this incident will flare up in the village and people will make jokes and fun of me. And, I knew I was a few miles short to my home now, so I told the driver to drop me near the pond, he said I will drop you at your home; I said drop me near the pond because I would eat something for dinner, as no one would have cooked dinner for me; but within my heart I had a fear of being caught, because if my father had seen me stepping down out of the vehicle he might get furious and I certainly didn't want he attacking me again.

It was around eight o'clock at night when I arrived home, as I came close to the gate, firstly I peeked if my father is awake, or I am vulnerable to get attacked from anywhere. Silently and vigilantly I unlocked the gate slowly so that hinges don't make a noise, as the gate was old and its hinges were not greased so I made sure that no sort of noise is generated, grandmother saw me as I entered the house and she signaled that he is very violent at the moment and I was scared too, so I sat near grandmother where she was cooking and I started helping her by putting dry woods in the bonfire.

And in the meantime, father came out of the room but he did not say anything to me but he started staring at me, he went to the room again and came out with a sword and I ran away again, and locked the gate outside, and grandmother was trying to calm him and father started screaming, and said you are beating my mother, I said no I was not beating your mother. I asked him, why do you want to kill me? He furiously replied that I am not your father, and I will kill you if you try to enter the house again.

And then grandmother instructed me to go to her daughter's house and she will come there in a while. So, I was hesitating to enter the gate of grandmother's daughter, Sita Devi, there because I knew their inner nature that they didn't want me to stay otherwise father wouldn't have been so violent. So, I went to my aunt's house which was half a minute away north, as I knocked their gate. Her husband came and said, what happened? What do you want? And I told him that father is after me with the sword and he wants to kill me, so grandmother sent me to your house to sleep here tonight, grandmother is coming too.

After a minute aunt, Sita Devi, came out suddenly and asked me, if is her mother was, okay? They all ran outside to see grandmother and locked their main gate and I was out stranded there waiting for some comfort and then after some time grandmother came at aunt's house and told her daughter, let Neeraj sleep there for tonight and in the morning I would see what to do because she wanted to call my father's elder brother or his cousin who had borrowed land on lease on my father's property.

However, that night when I was sheltered for a night there, before sleeping, they asked me a series of questions; what did you do to him? What did you say to him? Why did he get so violent? He has never been this violent, ever; I told them that my father was telling me that he is not my father and then my aunt said, of course he is right, you were taken away by your mother at a tiny age, so he doesn't know whether you are his son or someone's else. I felt so disgusted that I didn't want to sleep there, but I had no other choice. The feeling of ending my life was going through crests and troughs, but the feeling of survival was also there.

So, they spread a blanket in their storeroom where steel trunks and drums were stocked up and said sleep there. After a while I was almost falling asleep, I could hear aunt telling her husband to lock everything, where the cash is, where the jewelry is, lock the gate from inside too. I felt worst because my intentions were to save my life and they were more concerned about their stuff and treating me as if I was a thief. Life was teaching me a new lesson at every step and erasing the curtains for my eyes to have a clear vision about who is who and by discerning that I found out it was exactly as I had sensed them at the very first sight; they were unhappy because there was a fear of losing something and now, I was probably very near to understand what it was.

Next morning, I was already awake but had my eyes closed to act like I was sleeping, because I was not sure how to act happy and how not to be seen unhappy, I was emotionally wrecked but being discerned vulnerable would give another person more power to hurt you. So, I woke up doing a happy stretch and thanked, by telling them I enjoyed sleeping as it was peaceful sleeping, but realistically it was a horrific night I had ever slept.

When I opened my eyes, everyone was eating breakfast. As I woke up, I went to bathroom to wash my face. Soon after I was soon given tea in a steel glass which was unwashed, I could see the stains on that steel glass; after the tea dries on the steel surface, it leaves its sticky marks. But I had no other choice to deal with these people. The doubt in the fear of making someone angry with my choices didn't let my vents open.

As I took the first sip, I had easily figured it out that they had added water in the residual tea and a couple of spoons of milk and it was not sweet, not tasty either. After having first sip, I

looked into other glasses lying into the sink and the color of the tea was clearly visible, because in the orphanage I had learned and memorized the entire process of preparing tea from the scratch. And, I knew at what step or layer, I grew what tea looks and tastes like without and with milk because me up as an astute observer. Even though I drank it to fill my stomach, locking my tastebuds and had it like I was drinking lukewarm water. And I placed the glass aside, and aunt said, you must be hungry, I replied no, I only have tea in the morning, but my stomach was burning itself with starvation, I wanted to eat something tasty to fill my stomach, I was missing the meals of the orphanage.

Soon, grandmother arrived there around nine o'clock and I saw her carrying food with both hands and I got so happy to see the food thinking that it was for me, I wanted to make her happy before I could get to eat that food, so I ran towards her and touched her feet, and as I bowed down, the food was in aunt's hands. And I politely asked grandmother, what did you cook, and she said, she has cooked nothing, and I didn't ask anything more, but grandmother gave me a justification that she gives first cooked meal of the day to her daughter, and it was for her.

Trust me, my dear reader. My appetite was just murdered that I didn't want to eat anything. These things happen when you desert your own children in the hands of others who are called relatives, please never ever leave your children unattended in the hands of your relatives!

After that incident, grandmother told me about her well-wisher whom she used to consider her son and Sita Devi him as a brother named Kalia (Kavinder Raj), who had taken land on lease from grandmother for running a poultry farm has come there in the farm, and grandmother escorted me to that poultry

farm where that man was sitting in his office. Grandmother told me to touch his feet, I did, and he didn't wish or bless me anything but that was okay, grandmother said that man, he wants some support to study further.

Of course, I wanted to have some support but not for studies anymore. The feeling of studying further was murdered a short time back. Kalia asked me about my qualification, where my mother was, where did I grow up, how did I come at my father's house for what reasons, after these years? I had no, but I found him shooting these questions like poisoned arrows into my senses. I smiled and replied that I had come here to study further, but my smile wasn't so effective that it could have extracted his compassion, but that was okay beyond any options or choices left.

And then grandmother requested Kalia to take me with him to make me a better human being so I could learn ways of life; Kalia so sweetly lured me by saying that he would help me study further. I was thinking, maybe this is the turning point of your life, if you would learn a new way of life and study further, you could reshape your life. I wanted to feel better; I wanted to breathe freely because I was being eaten alive by the pain and emotional trauma these people had given me.

And for a change I agreed to go along with Kalia knitting a thought, my grandmother is so experienced, has seen so many phases of life and probably she was guiding me through her expertise and supporting me to stay away from the probable harm that my father could have done to my life or maybe she was just feeding me to a wild boar to get churned and gulped off. So, many thoughts were swirling my mind at that time, I had a naïve sense of making everyone smile and happy to hide



my pain and wounds so that people don't judge me and see the vulnerability. And I was ready to go with this man Kalia.

This man Kalia took me with him on his scooter his house while he kept asking me questions about my education, mother, and reasons I had come to meet my father and I answered him everything sincerely. As he arrived at his residence, there was a huge black gate which was locked from inside and he called some name. A guy of my age came and unlocked the gate, this guy who opened the gate saw me with an aversive look as if I was begging for something from him. That house was a double-story building, for me a person having double story building, a lush lawn, two new motorbikes and a complete concrete house, and their rude behavior was rusting my constructive confidence because I felt so humble and vulnerable.

I was an astute observer because I had lived a long life in the childhood among so many souls at a time and naturally, I was gifted to assess someone's mind and body language which helped me to understand these kinds of people are genetically arrogant by getting an intuition the kind of vibes I had sensed the very first moment I saw Kalia's eyes. And what happened next, it shook my soul.

As I entered the house and Kalia's room following him, I saw there was one more boy playing video games; I wished him namaste. He looked deep into my eyes, and I got scared and respected him with a smile and saw him flaring his hairstyle by blowing air upward; I found it kind of cool. And watching him showing styles to me, I started looking things like; a big refrigerator, long silky curtains, electricity reserves to fulfill the needs of it when electricity goes off, wall mounted air-conditioner, and an old blind man who was his father.

And, Kalia opens the refrigerator and drinks cold water, while his sons talking to him and whispered to each other; who is this boy, and why have you brought him home? And he told his sons, he the son of Mohan Krishan, so they knew who was my father because they would have traveled there with Kalia? Then, Kalia told them to do whatever they were doing, he again opened the refrigerator and drank water with a bottle and told me to get a glass pointing where the kitchen was, I saw there was no clean glass but stained utensils in the sink. I washed one steel glass and returned to Kalia to get water; he poured the water, and I gulped the water as I was so thirsty.

Meanwhile, his younger son also asked for cold water while he was still playing video games on the computer, and his father told him to get up and get a glass to drink water, he told his father that maid did not come to wash utensils today and he drank the water with a bottle like his father. Then, his elder son also demanded cold water too, and these things were happening within a fraction of seconds, he wanted to drink water in the glass, so his father told him to help himself, on that sentence, they started arguing and shouting at each other loudly that scared me, and I adjusted myself near to the main door. And then his father told me to wash a glass, and I did it to stop argument.

It was an afternoon argument when head is always on the boil, and on top those were peak days of the summer. They turned on the air conditioner and slept in the bed, and I was standing, and then Kalia told me, that you go and sleep in the couch but take off your shoes and socks. I took off my shoes and socks and dozed off in no time on that comfortable couch. After some time, I woke up hearing some voices and as I opened my eyes, saw a couple of women were there talking and laughing. And after some time, they left the room, these people were Kalia's

brother's family who was a Psychiatrist Dr. Kulwinder Ahuja and his family with whom I was introduced later.

Now it was the evening time, so Kalia asked me, do you know cooking? So, I thought maybe he just wanted to know what kind of skills do I possess? I answered, yes! He smiled and said, what can you cook, so I enthusiastically replied I can cook everything he said, that is good. He said, he is tired of working all day in the poultry farm, can you knead the wheat flour, I said, yes, and I did it quickly and he was happy to see the work done. After some time, he joined me in the kitchen and said, see we are like family members, you are like my sons and I am of your father's age, your father is mentally ill, so you don't worry. We have been giving him medicine for so long, so as long as you are here, you will eat what we will eat and we will co-operate with you; that sounded compassionate and fair to me, by saying that he earned my regards, and I took his words very seriously.

Days passed by months passed by, and I started seeing the actual colors of Kalia and his family and the ambiance of the house was also changing from peaceful green to violent red. After a few months, I started learning the facts about how he was treating me; I was not his child, of course, and he was not treating me like his sons, as he had told me in the start. I was a full-time servant.

Every morning I would wake up early, make bed tea for Kalia and his sons, collect their utensils, fill buckets of cold and hot water in their washroom, take care of their laundry, and then I would ask them what would they like to eat for lunch and then evening snacks, washing utensils, mopping, dusting, washing their motorbikes and cars, and arrange things when they have guests. I was not allowed to talk to anyone except Kalia and his sons.

His children would talk to me sweetly when they used to be hungry and needed anything to eat. The elder one used to go to the college and the younger one used to go to the school early and would come back in the afternoon. As Kalia's younger son would come back from the school, he would tell me to pour him a glass of water, then after some time he would tell me to cook Parantha for him, and after some time he would tell me to cook noodles for him, and then I will wash the utensils every time he would finish eating. And then Kalia's elder son would come, and I would fulfill his orders and follow his commands. They would sweetly call me brother but cleverly use me as their servant.

Now I was less human but more a dishwasher, toilet cleaner, cobbler, washing machine, floor cleaner. After everyone will go at their respective schedules, I used to be left home with instructions to cook lentils, rice, and wash the utensils and fill the water bottles, rinse the clothes from the washing machine, and put them to dry and collect it before the evening. Help his blind father to escort him to the washroom and clean his urinal pot whenever he says so, whenever Kalia would come and visit home a couple of times. He would always check on me whether I have finished work properly.

One afternoon, I was hungry and sleepy because I had no energy working all day in the sweltering summer, so I opened the refrigerator and ate some sweets, drank water, and went to sleep on the couch. And after Kalia's younger son arrived home in the afternoon, he complained that some sweets are missing, and I opened the packet; he started ranting like I had stolen something; I had eaten those sweets by keeping Kalia's words in the mind; that you are like my sons, and you don't have to worry. But later, I had to regret and worry a lot; I felt so trapped,



and I started requesting that I wanted to go home. And then, he came up with an idea how to keep me in the house.

Soon, he came up with an idea which he explained to me later that you would have your own business and can earn a good amount of money. Kalia and his elder son used to keep conspiring things, how to make use of me totally and whenever they find me near, they will stop the talk and always tell me to do some work that will keep me busy. He used to wake me up early in the morning to vaccinate the chickens in his poultry farm. These people used me as much as they could have.

One Sunday morning, I had a severe cough and fever, and every task I was being told to complete was draining out of my consciousness because I was finding it hard to concentrate, Kalia had told me to stop going into the kitchen until I get better, he had not given me anything to eat for breakfast, everyone was watching television. I got scared to see the color of mucus releasing through cough; I go into the washroom and stand in the front of mirror and would have a close look into my eyes and see my dull face; I started crying in the washroom after feeling lonely and with the hunger. And I was washing my face to hide tears and then again, crying; the pain was like tears were leaking through my eyes, no matter how badly I control myself.

As I was moving back and forth in the washroom, Kalia saw me crying, and it probably irritated him, and he told me to shut up. He said, get the clothes out of the washing machine and put it on the wire to dry. And, I said, I would like to do it later because I was not feeling well. He said, now you have started arguing with me, who do you think who you are, and he came close, pulled my hair. He started slapping me in a series and hit me in the stomach with kicks. And, I was begging please don't hit me,



I would go just now and put the clothes on the wire, I would do everything you would tell me to do, just please don't hit me, I am sick, and I did what he told me to do.

I had to do what I was told to escape from physical abuse because I was weak and sick; I was afraid, what if they injure me badly? I put on the clothes on the wire to dry in chilling cold and no sun was out, and I had fever. He treated me inhumanly. And I cried and told him; I don't want to live with you here; I want to go home, give me my money for the months I have worked. When he left for some work in the city, I went to his brother's house and asked for one hundred rupees from his wife, but she wanted to know, why I needed the money. So, I explained to her that he pulled my hair, slapped me, kicked me in the stomach and I am sick, coughing, I am human; I have no one, my mother and father are not with to take care of me and, I was sent along this man that he would treat me right, but he is so inhumane.

And, she said, it is a minor thing, and you are stretching the matter. And somehow, she made me to stay there that she would ask Kalia why he hit you; you are a nice boy, and you shouldn't be treated as he done to you; you cook nicely, you clean everything, and you listen to everything. And I said, yes. I asked if I do all the work in both the houses then why am I being punished for my circumstances. I am working at your house, because you give medicine to my father and for his wellness, I am doing the things that I had never thought of, I told her that you are taking advantage of my situation. And I went to my room and slept on the couch.

After this physical abuse, living every hour with them was suffocating, they came up with a new plan to retain to save their image in the village, what if I had successfully returned

home and I would have let the villagers know that he had beaten me and treated me as a servant? So, they decided to enroll me in the computer institute. Because now Kalia was saying that you should learn Accounts and for that you need to learn computers. At the same time, they were planning to take a new franchise of a poultry feed because they had a full-fledged plan to keep me with them as a servant but on a different level; I was logical enough to sense the future and entailing of their conspiracy.

Anyhow, I wanted to escape from this abusive people, but escaping is never easy when you are in a trap and have no place to go to hide. I started finding reasonable ways to run away; I had to leave that place in a way that I don't get accountable for anything; If I would have run out just like that without a plan, they could have accused me of stealing and then I would have ended up in the jail, so I thought of a plan where they cannot blame me for anything. They used to give me a bicycle to ride to go to the computer institute.

Now I would like to share how was my experience in the computer class for the first time. Kalia's elder son took me to a computer institute and enrolled me there. Getting a change in the environment was kind of exciting for me, but my face was dull enough and distorted confidence because of the psychological and physical abuse. But somehow, I encouraged the child in me and booted myself up for a new educational journey.

I was already quite emotionally wrecked and scared to open in front of an unfamiliar environment of that classroom because of insecurity born through my circumstances. Very first moment when I found the desk to sit in computer class, I was asked to introduce myself; I stood up and, then teacher said,

please sit down, you don't have to stand up to speak or answer, that moment of respect made me so emotional because that was a gesture to make me feel comfortable. I thanked the teacher to make me feel comfortable because I was so insecure of what I had completely turned into a servant, I would look at other students' clothing, shoes, hairstyles, recognize the smell of perfumes, and find them talking about their cars and motorbikes, I used to find uncomfortable because I was afraid if these rich students would also treat me like Kalia's sons were treating me.

So, I tried to keep myself restricted by not to talk with anyone in the classroom unnecessarily, but getting into the classroom reminded me of my school days and the powerful brain I had. Though the ambiance of this institute was serene, I introduced myself, the teacher asked me about my father's profession and to hide the truth, I told them that my father runs a poultry farm. And those boys there made fun of me, calling me a chicken. And, I had to ignore all that crap; I was well expert to lead the wolf-pack, so it didn't bother me. Sadly, no one would sit with me because I seemed like a poor boy, in fact exactly the servant kind what Kalia had turned me into.

I did not have nice clothes to put on while going to the computer class, at home I wouldn't care about my clothes at all because I knew I was a servant there but in the new environment, I would expect someone to treat me with respect and talk to me politely, so how I looked, made a huge difference among those students and their approach to me. I would go to the computer institute in bathroom slippers, but later everyone started gelling-up with me because of my intelligence.

So, living at Kalia's residence was the worst phase of my life and I was feeling suffocated now, one day he used vulgar slangs for

no reason, because when he came home for lunch, I was cooking lunch, and he ordered rudely, serve the lunch and I said, just a couple of minutes while I was cleaning the plates and spoons with cloth. And he yelled at me, released his frustration on me with vulgar slangs related to my mother and I felt so bad. Feeling disrespected with verbal abuse I wanted to run again, and I was getting late for the computer class too, and he wanted the food at the same time. If he was treating me like his sons as he claimed to, he could have told me to eat and go to the computer class that he never did.

He questioned me loudly. What the heck have you been doing since morning? Thinking of freeing myself from the trap he was spinning, I humbly replied, I was cleaning bathroom, and then cleaned urinal pots of your father, cleaned the room, dusting, mopping, filled water bottles, cleaned utensils and then I was called by your sister-in-law, she also used me to do some of her chores and I said cooking takes time and that is how it was delayed. It was an excruciating moment that would bleed anyone's mind who will go through this phase of life. But he said, f\*ck off and do the things or I would hit you again, keep your mouth shut and don't argue with me.

And, after eating lunch in a hurry, I left for the computer class, spent a wonderful time there learning in the class. On the way back home, I was cycling so fast and thinking of how Kalia treated me before I left for the computer class and how would he treat me as I arrive home, maybe he would scold me or beat me with slaps and kicks, a lot of frustration, stress, depression was swarming my mind.

Next thing I know a bus hit me and I lost the control of the bicycle and fell down sharply on the divider, because of the soil and grass my head was not injured, but my arms and face was



badly injured, arms were badly bruised because of the friction and the skin of the face was peeled off because of the pedal revolving with the maximum speed on forehead, cheeks, and eyes. My wounds were spilling the blood intermittently every time I talk or make movements, but I was least bothered about my pain, but more concerned about the bicycle. It petrified me that what would Kalia say, maybe he would ask me to pay the money that you broke the cycle. All kinds of thoughts were draining me more. And what if he would make me stay at his home longer to pay the cost because I wanted to get away from his trap.

I was trembling, but somehow I managed to walk four miles way back home dragging the broken bicycle, while walking and dragging the bicycle; I saw a lot of bicycles repairing shops on the way; the mechanics were expecting me to visit their shops, staring at me and calling me to get the bicycle fixed, I replied to some mechanics saying I had no money, told some that I would come back later and some mechanics were saying drop the bicycle here and we would repair it, as it was heavy to drag. I was excessively stressed and scared so did not want to make any more mistakes; I was also thinking what if I gave a bicycle to the repairing shop, Kalia would say that you lost the bicycle and may hit me badly, it was hard to take right decisions.

When I arrived back home, no one was available there to see me, I took a long breath of relief and parked the bicycle outside the kitchen behind the old bike so it doesn't get noticed, and rushed to the washroom, I cried heavily thinking of if I had someone my own I would call them and ask for help, but reality was cruel and I stopped myself so that his father couldn't hear me, who was awake in the other room playing a radio. I quickly washed my face, but it was so painful to wash but I knew before applying anything on the wounds, it needs to be cleaned, so



after washing my face, I applied turmeric powder and mustard oil and, I slept on the couch.

In the evening when I woke up, I was late to prepare evening tea for everyone; they were having tea already, and I did not talk to anyone, went to the washroom and then in the kitchen to drink water, all of them were not asking me anything but staring at me. I was getting a feel that someone would hit me if I made one more mistake now. Then, Kalia asked me what happened to the bicycle outside, I said I was coming back home on the bicycle and some roadways bus hit me. He said, surely your f\*cking mind would be wandering somewhere else, I didn't say anything after, but I said; I am sorry, please forgive me, I did not do it intentionally.

Kalia said, his sons have been riding the same bicycle for years and they never got it smashed this way, and I said sorry with weeping eyes. I decided to bury the pain under my skin and decided to work hard until things get settled, deep inside I wanted to pay the cost of the smashed bicycle, so I started working by keeping my heart frozen so that it wouldn't feel any heat to melt and flow through the eyes. I remember, just after a couple of days, I was looking at my wounds in the mirror and Kalia's elder son said, your styling days are over, your face is defaced, you are not as beautiful as you thought you were it was mean to say someone in the pain. I smiled and answered him, God Sees Truth but Waits, he did not understand it, and I wish someday he would understand.

Ever since that day, Kalia started giving me calculated bus fare. Now I started traveling in the passenger bus for the computer classes. It was even new but exciting thing for me, because those needed coins and bills were in my hand but calculated. But seeing money in my hands sparked a fresh hope to escape

from that trap. Now I had to save the money go to escape from this trap. It was like this universe was building new paths for me to walk away from this cruel home.

Several days passed by; I was spending the bus fare only to reach the computer class but while coming back; I started taking lifts on the motor-bikes way back home, that is how I started saving money. But I worked so hard at whatever they asked for, day and night, and now my heart and soul was convinced that I had paid the price of the smashed bicycle, and I had money to escape from this gloomy house. I started rehearsing in the washroom mirror that how would I express my feelings and how would I tell him that I want to leave? I would prepare every probable rebuttal that he may try to deceive me with his dual image. It almost took me a week to prepare my mind and charting out the plan of survival after the escape.

After rehearsals, I decided to talk about it with Kalia, so next day in the morning when I made bed tea for them, I told Kalia that I do not want to live with you anymore and I want to go home. They all were shocked of my decision because for them it was like I was happy working for them, it's like they have a happy servant who completes all the tasks as and whenever they command. They surely didn't know how I had caged my heart and dried the eyes. Even though I served them with all my energy, but that was to repay the price of the bicycle I had smashed in the accident.

And, after bed tea, I fixed them breakfast, cleaned utensils, mopped the floor and moved out from their trap, I asked for money, Kalia refused to give me any money, maybe he thought how far he would go without money, he knew that he always gave me calculated money, but I always saved money by taking

lifts. Then I showed my polythene bag in which I had my clothes; to show that I am not taking what's not mine. I showed my pockets to them, my shoes and then I said I would spend some time with my grandmother and would be back if I want to. That's how I escaped, and my thanks go to those bike riders who happily gave me lifts without expecting anything from me.

I learned a lesson that people have different perspectives tailored to their needs, they won't care about your feelings, they would even sell you to bleed, some people love to dominate others because they want to see themselves on top and everyone at their bottom, which is totally different in the reality. And, later, I realized that how the universe conspired and saved me after I met that accident and gave me a new way to escape from the brutal people.

Dear reader, I request you to think about your children before you decide to play on the verge of divorce, you may enjoy the freedom from the existing relationship by finding a new spouse for your life. Think wisely, take all the necessary decisions to live your own life to find the peace but please don't let your children face the tough time caused by your decisions, let them first breathe and play in your arms, let them feel you totally, let them have a taste of what true parents do for their kids, not by sacrificing things but embracing the lives of children under the umbrella of your wise and kind parenthood.

Children will cry, bleed, fall down, stand and raise themselves up, but when you will get old, when your skin will get so many folds, when your hair would turn gray, when your vessels won't flow the blood smoothly, when you won't have adrenaline rush, when your hands would tremble, when you won't have no one left to show you the mirror, you will get all the pain back what your children would go through. I have witnessed this

experience, at the end you will regret by the time lost will never be recovered. Always trust the universe and do good to your loved ones, especially your own children. Sow a seed if you want to protect and raise the plant, otherwise, save yourself from the coming disaster, life is too short to be little, never escape the hard time, face it bravely.

In this chapter, I wanted you to see how people would treat your children in your absence. And, if this keeps happening in this world, that day is not so far when your children would become heartless which you will regret later. That is why I fold my hands and request to all the parents to nurture the innocent hearts of your children by not letting them feel churned. You can save your children because they are yours, they trust you, look into their eyes before you take a decision, make a haven for them, and protect them. In my case, I was alone, but you have a choice; don't harm them.



## OUTCAST

### BARBED-AISLE



After escaping from the trap, I made a phone call to my elder brother, Amit, and asked him, where is he staying? He told me the address and after some time I arrived at his rented room, as I arrived there, I saw mother and her brother were on the roof talking to each other. I went on the roof and touched their feet; they hugged me and asked me if I needed something. I told them I am so tired, and I want to sleep for some time.

I lied down in the floor-bedding; I covered my face with a pillow, started sobbing and tried not to let anyone know what I had been going through; after half an hour I wiped my tears, sneezed off the nostrils, washed my face and brush my hair and asked mother if she had lemons. I made a glass of lemon for me and sipped it to get myself in the normal mode telling myself you are strong, now don't cry like a baby. You are out of the trap, feel the freedom, plan your future and take every step carefully, understand what you are going to do with your life.



And after a few hours, my elder brother came home from his work. He asked me, where have I been? I told him I was working as a servant in a house; they did not pay me the money, so I decided to stop working for them and now I want to work at some new place where I can earn some money to support myself to survive.

My brother was carefree to see me, but I could see the heaviness in his eyes. But he would never say anything because he was working so hard at a gas station. For some days I did not start to find work but was stabilizing my mind, talking to my mother, maternal uncle, and my brother at times to understand what is running on their minds and how they are feeling inside. Every day I would see how my brother would come from the job exhausted and sleep right after arriving home. Mother was working at someone's house as a maid to earn some money, uncle was working at a hotel as cook. I saw all of them are working every day and leaving home in the morning and coming back home in the evening.

After going through everyone's heart and mind, I listened to what they did not say, and I saw what they were hesitating to show, after all they were working for themselves and supporting them. And I realized that I will be a burden for all of them, by coming here I have caused them some kind of disturbance that they won't speak out because of the blood bond, but I knew that if they won't speak now but after some time when the suppression gets beyond the limit; vents would open, and I might get burned. So, my thoughts were never on rest, always running like a chariot of time, on and on.

Those were the moments when thoughts of terminating my breath were swirling a lot, I was feeling worthless, hopeless, lifeless, aimless and it was hard for me to cope with the stress

and trauma that I had gone through. But I was telling myself that wait for a few days and let's see if you can do something for yourself, just give yourself a chance, maybe a few days more and you never know what good is waiting for you, maybe you are getting sculpted with this fire to become someone successful, I had read about famous people's lives in the books and newspapers, so I was day dreaming with fierce hope and forcing myself to hold on.

Days and nights were passing by, I was not able to get away through the distress and pain. I was stuck where those people had assaulted me psychologically and physically, my brain was working overtime churning a lot of thoughts beyond its boundaries, my hopes were shattered and crushing my heart but deep down the spirit in me was pumping my heart, encouraging my lungs to breathe, and telling my senses to stay alive. The child in me was so supportive that it was giving me a message that you can do whatever you want to if you try so, that slight hope of doing something if I try was lingering to push me further.

Every time I felt giving up, the voice in my head was telling me that, you are a little educated and look at your brother, mother, and other people who you have just met in your family are not up to what you have achieved so far. So, don't let these people of your life down who have supported you, if they would come to know that you are losing hopes and breaking down, they will feel sad, they will get hurt, their hopes would get down, they helped you because they had trust in you that you will do something extraordinary.

I was recalling all the people who had played a very important role in my life. I started thinking that by ending my life in those harsh circumstances would be a matter of selfishness.

Constructive thoughts of what if you could try one more time; give it a shot, you can conquer anything and everything. My soul was guiding my footsteps that how I have traveled this far excruciatingly, and life is just a few more steps away and you will be able to live a happy life. I had never been that low ever in my life.

And then I decided to do something constructive practical instead of overthinking, I went to a nearest cyber -cafe and asked the computer operator if I could get a resume written, the computer operator told me it would cost me five rupees. And I couldn't afford that small amount of money for the print because I did not have money because it was spent escaping from the dark house of Kalia, he had paid me no money, all the money I had accumulated got spent in eating and traveling.

And then, I started inquiring about how to get a job and how to prepare for interview questions thoroughly; I started reading about resumes, how to stay motivated and confident, and how to enhance communication skills, all the attributes which were essential to get a job, I wanted to get a job to gain my lost hope. I started borrowing money from my maternal uncle and brother in a rotational manner so that they don't feel burdened because of me. They would give me ten-twenty rupees a day.

After giving me money, they would also tell me something to do, like, washing clothes, cleaning uncle's shop, washing utensils, etc. In order to repay the money given to me I would wash my brother's uniform which used to be very thick, and his collars and cuffs used to be heavily stained, that it would take me five- ten minutes hard brushing, washing and rinsing it. And, before getting ready for his work, he would tell me to cook pancakes for his breakfast and lunch, washing his tiff-in-box, and polishing his shoes because my mother was lazy, and she did

not know how to cook properly, she would wake up at her own time and her brother would also wake up very late and my brother needed to leave early, this is how I was repaying the borrowed money because I was still not earning money.

It kept on for a few weeks, and one day while exploring for job opportunities; I entered a business complex, Rahu Plaza, I started visiting every shop in that business complex inquiring if they had any vacancy; any kind of job whether a sweeper because I was good at mopping and sweeping, a peon because I was good at stacking files and papers, managing things serving water and tea, I was looking for any kind of job; I was waiting for some business owner who would say yes; you are hired, where I could work and earn to support myself because I was so tired and sick of cooking meals at home, washing clothes of all family members, polishing shoes and maintaining household things, I was feeling worn-out, day by day I am being degraded; this kind of thought was hollowing my strength and trailing me to a miserable breathing.

Days went by, I was not finding any job, but every day I would ask money from my brother and maternal uncle because I was doing all their work and household chores, so asking money every day was not making me feel hesitated because I knew I was repaying it in the other form. I did not lose hope to find a job, I would jot down all the expressions, words, reactions, laughter, and rude behavior of each person while being rejected or denied for inquiries for a job. While returning home, I would think of all the instances and work on it, so I don't get rejections and denials. I had a feeling that I am already naked and what else is there to hide; I understood people are ready to say no, they will reject me because of my looks, because of my family backgrounds, because of lack of a degree or diploma. But I decided to die looking for a job.



After two weeks, I found a shop named Paperback Documentation where an old man was sitting at a counter; he looked like a gentleman; I asked for his permission if I could talk to him for a minute, he warmly acknowledged and said sit down. I said no thank you, because I wasn't sure if he would give me a job or maybe he would reject me, I did not want to waste time sitting.

But I respectfully told him I am looking for a job, he asked me if I had work experience, I replied, no I am a fresher. I have worked nowhere so whatever position you have; I would do anything. After he came to know, I have never worked before and he said; we need a boy for operating a photostat machine and you will have to work for ten hours and there will be no vacation, and I asked how much money would I get? He said eight hundred rupees a month, and I quickly calculated the traveling expenses in my mind, and I got so excited to hear that much amount of money. Because it was the ever, I would get eight hundred rupees and that would be my money and I can do anything. I accepted the job offer, and that gentleman said when would you like to start? I said, from just now, he got so happy and ordered a cup of tea for me and said, go upstairs, first learn for a couple of days and then you would handle this expensive machine of photocopy.

That's how I got my first job, and I started working there morning through evening; it was an exciting unfamiliar work for me; I was putting all my efforts and working hard to learn and master over the work. I was meeting new people every day, some would be so polite, and others would be so rude and, it was a part of life and work too, so I was letting this wave of work drift me wherever it could, I never resisted.



I remember, the owner used to ask me, Neeraj, why don't you bring the lunch with you? And I would tell him that I live alone so it gets very hard to prepare lunch, and the fact was that I used to cook in the early morning before electricity would get off. And, just for my breakfast but for my mother, brother and maternal uncle, every morning I would wake up early and cook breakfast, pack lunch and polish shoes for my brother. And then I would take a shower and by the time it was my turn to eat breakfast I would get late and often would arrive at work hungry.

Mother would cook food at times but I could not carry it for lunch because the pancakes that she used to cook were not properly cooked, any vegetable she would cook will either be raw or over cooked with strong salt, turmeric, or chilies, and I would feel insecure that what if someone would taste my food or even see, they will make fun of me or would ask who cooked it and if I would tell that my mother cooked it, it would be an embarrassment that what kind of family I belong to? I never carried lunch at work. Though I would take a lunch break and sit or lie down in the park and chew grass-shoots and drink as much as water I could from the garden tap. And, sometimes, I would chew paper and swallow it because it used to fill my stomach to avoid burning sensation.

It is how I started working in the Paperback Documentation, and for the first time when I got my salary, eight hundred rupees. I was so thrilled to see that much money; I recalled all the months spent at Kalia's residence working as a servant, and he did not pay me my wages. After I received my salary, I went back home and gave some money to my mother as an emotional gratitude that I am giving you first earning of my life and that is how; I started earning.

Now to keep working and maintaining a healthy communication with employer, family, friends, colleagues and for staying available. I thought to buy a mobile phone. This thought of buying a new mobile phone triggered the desire in me to save money. I started thinking of having a new mobile phone, where I would have a personal mobile number, I could be reached at any time, and I could make phone calls to save time.

And, after six months, I bought a new mobile phone which was a little expensive than my brother's mobile phone. I was excited to show it to my brother, mother, and paternal uncle, after they saw the mobile phone in my hand; my brother started telling me that instead of spending on things, help to ease the monthly expenses as he had bought the air-cooler on installments. I agreed to his guidance and started contributing to household expenses, even though my brother was earning more than me, knowing this that I was earning, so he started saving his money and told me that this month you would take care of the household expenses, which was tough for me because I was earning a small amount as compared to him.

As my brother had already started saving money because he was investing in local chit-funds where your deposited money stays locked until all the members take advantage of the deposits, like if you have borrowed money in chit fund scheme, you are bound to pay until you clear the dues of your borrowed credit. This was the reason that I started looking for a new job which would pay me more and I could run the household expenses. While working at the Paperback Documentation, I started looking for a new job because before that a lot of customers had offered me jobs so it was an opportunity if I could get a change with a salary-hike.

I also started requesting my colleague to look for opportunities for me and let me know if there are any other jobs available according to my eligibility that can pay me more than what I was getting. After some days, my colleague recommended me a job of a domestic call center, and he urged me to apply for this job, as my colleague always appreciated me that I was good at communication and the chances are that I may get hired easily.

Next day, I took a half day off telling the owner that I have some urgent work at home, and I would come back in the afternoon. He said yes but try to come early. And I left to apply for a new job, while traveling I was looking here and there because I was scared a bit because I had told my employer that I had an urgent work at home and what if he spotted me looking for a job, he would terminate me without paying my salary? But I had no other option other than to find a job that would pay me a good amount of money to run my household expenses.

So, I conquered my fear by taking a risk leaving its fate on the universe and applied for the job that my colleague had recommended for me. And card was flipped magically that I got selected for a new job as a tele-caller in an insurance company for four thousand five hundred rupees a month and that was a huge leap for me. And the HR manager of the insurance company told me to bring my educational credentials and complete all the paperwork within a week. After the interview, I went back to work and told my colleague about my selection; he congratulated and said, he knew you would be selected. I smiled and thanked him with a hug.

But leaving the current job in the middle of the month seemed a bit difficult because losing the chances of getting my wages were high. So, my colleague who had recommended me

the job, made a call to one of his friends who was already working there and asked for a two weeks' time for me to complete the formalities and paperwork, so his friend told him not to worry. And now I was secured to get my job in the insurance company. I used to remain excited and confident because I knew soon after this month ends, I would get paid a higher salary and I would comfortably run household expenses and save money for me.

I worked enthusiastically at the Paperback Documentation during my last days at the work, my employer used to find it different yet good. So, he called me one day after lunch and told me, Neeraj; I am very impressed with your hard work and dedication, I would raise your salary by five hundred rupees after this month, I smiled and thanked him. And, I decided it was the right time to let him know about my unavailability; I told him, that I want a week's off because I want to go my home in the village to spend a few days and I would be back, employer said, it won't be possible for him to allow me to go on a week off, so he induced a fear of loss; that he may have to see the replacement if you spent over two days off. And then he told me to get back to work.

I shared this conversation with my colleague, and he said, don't worry, just don't lose the opportunity where you are selected, finish your paperwork and all the formalities to join the new job. He also taught me a little about personality development, he also suggested me to buy a couple of basic colored formal dress shirts and a pair of black shoes. After getting my salary, I informed the colleague to convey my message to the employer that I have some urgent work that may force me to spend over a week time off. He laughed and said OKAY; I got it, sir, congratulated me and told me to stay in touch with him.



After I receive the remuneration, I purchased two formal dress shirts as my colleague had advised me to, but I couldn't buy black shoes because I had no money left now except for the calculated bus fare for everyday traveling to and from the work. On the remuneration day's evening my colleague called me and asked if I had purchased clothes and shoes, I told him about the dress shirts but not about the shoes, so he asked, did you buy the black shoes? I told him that I am out of money and only traveling expenses are left. He asked for my shoe number and told me to meet him before going to the new job. I sensed he would bring shoes for me so; I told him please wait for a few days I would ask for an advance to buy the shoes from my new job. So, he told me. It doesn't work in the corporates, but only with small business owners.

And next day, my colleague called me in the early morning and told me to meet him at the business owner's shop; and it perplexed me that why does he want me to meet him outside the business owner's shop. I told him; I am scared to be spotted by the business employer and I may get late for the new job, he said, don't worry. So, I went to meet my colleague, as I saw him outside the shop, the shop was closed and I took a deep breath, and saw him carrying a bag, so I sensed he brought me a pair of shoes. And, he said, you are looking very nice in these formals, just work hard and keep in touch, and he opened the bag; and he said, here is the tiffin for carrying lunch and a pair of shoes, and this much attention brought tears to my eyes and I said, I would pay you the money for what you have done, he said, you need a slap nothing else. And he hugged me and said, go now before the shop owner comes here. After walking a few steps away, I looked back, and he was smiling and waved and signaled. Check the time and run fast.



And I entered the new office of the insurance company to join in for my first day. Before getting on the floor of tele-calling department, HR manager welcomed me with a smile and told me to wait until the branch manager comes and then you would be allowed to work.

After the branch manager arrived at the office, everyone stood up, so did I, and then manager called me to his office. He shook hands with me, and I extended with double enthusiasm then if, because it was a matter of respect for me, that a manager at a very high position extended himself with such a courtesy to shake hands with me. And I got so comfortable, and he ran me through a code of conduct and introduced me to the hierarchy to approach in case of any problem.

And that is how I joined my new job, worked hard and promoted as tele-calling administrator within two months of my performance with a salary hike of one thousand rupees and it continued for almost two years. I was learning about the new levels of communication, blending it with my confidence. And, very soon, I started training the new joiners and helped them to advance their personality and communication traits. I was earning considerably suitable amount of money that could easily run my household expenses, feed my needs and choices.

Seeing me earning good, as I was buying new clothes, deodorants, shampoos, hair-conditioners, sunscreens and shoes for me to maintain corporate personality standards; my brother started spending less and told me now you are earning good, so you should learn about paying utility bills too by drawing a new way where he claimed that he needed to save money to get married and for that he needed to purchase jewelry for his future wife. All things considered, I started supporting him, in regard to he was elder to me, and I owe some

gratitude for him doing little favors initially. I took all the responsibility to run the household necessities so that he can maximize his savings.

And down the road I realized that he only wanted to save the money and was not spending any money on household expenditure so; It started burdening my shoulders because now all the money I was earning was being spent, whereas he was saving, and I could not save because he would tell me that his money is locked up for the next two years in the investment and he couldn't break the chit funds, if he tried to do so, he would lose the money. And that is how a seed of insecurity germinated because of the expenditure imbalanced; you can't escape from the lion's den if there is only one way in and out.

Over the time, my days started getting miserable, I was finding it uncomfortable to keep all the sides up being a one-man army because I had more other things important those needed to be fixed. One solution for all the rising problems was that I needed a job that can pay me more than that I was already earning. Since my childhood, I was a little good at remembering things, and I started exploring my memory reserves to find out if there are any other jobs that could pay me well.

I remember, while traveling in the buses I used to pay close attention to the signboards, banners, and buildings along the highways. I would memorize the names, locations, and colors of the buildings to enhance my knowledge of the place wherever I would pass through having one thought on mind that you never know one day when you would need to find that place again because I had a belief that whatever facility is opened to public would drag you there with some kind of need in the near future. And, every time I would pass by the same buildings again, I would pay close attention.

Then after searching so many places through my memory reserve, I found that once I had seen an International Call Center building, where I had seen a hoarding of a boy and girl wearing headsets with microphones in nice formal clothes , that look intrigued me, and I started imaging myself like that boy in the hoarding.

I thought I should try for a job in an international call center, because now I had an experience of tele-calling for over one and a half years. I optimistically thought, what if I get selected for this job, I will work among educated people, and I would learn more about the English language to enhance my communications skills. After rehearsing several times in the mirror, I decided to appear in the interview. And one day I took a leave from work, and I appeared for an interview.

I still remember the very first of the interview, I was very enthusiastic and optimistic about passing the interview. The first question I was asked in an interview was, “Walk me through your resume” and I failed to reply, and then the interviewer asked, “Tell me about yourself?” I replied, my name is Neeraj and then I started speaking in the Hindi language, and the moment I uttered Hindi, I got rejected, the interviewer told me that we don’t need Hindi speakers but English speakers. I got so demoralized to learn that, speaking Hindi alone won’t give me bread and butter, I will have to speak good English to get a job in an international call center.

Even though I was rejected in the interview, I thanked to all the interviewers for allowing me to appear for the opportunity. As I was leaving the office, the person who was interviewing me, called me back for a minute and told me, I can again apply for an interview if I could work on the English language. And I got excited to learn about me getting a chance where I can again

apply for an interview that means I haven't lost the opportunity even I have failed once.

And, I considered this chance as a challenge, that no matter what, I would do my best to qualify next interview. I accepted the challenge and started working on the English language; surfing internet after my working hours, taking prints home and rehearse interview questions and answers when everyone would go to sleep and waking up early to rehearse it in the front of a mirror which I had read online that, with the help of mirror you can imagine yourself and it will help you gain confidence. I did it and gotten ready for the interview after a week. I had the fire set in my heart and a hope of shining in my eyes. I was so thrilled, and that image from the hoarding was on my mind, that I wanted to dress up and wear the same headset with a microphone among educated people.

And, after a week, I again went there in the international call center and applied for the job interview. This time the moment I opened the door of the office, I asked for a permission; may I come in, Sir? The recruiter who had interviewed me earlier, and suggested me to brush my English language, smiled at me and said, come in, please. Interview started with, what's your name? I replied, my name is Neeraj. And he asked me, are you ready for the interview today, I replied with a smile, yes sir, I am ready today, and he asked me one more time, are you sure, I said yes sir. I don't know why he didn't interview me this time, but he said, bring your documents tomorrow and a resume, and I thought I again made a mistake, so maybe he wants to give me one more opportunity.

And next day I took one more leave from my work and I went to the international call center to appear in the interview carrying all my documents and a resume. This time a female



officer interviewed me and asked, why should we hire you? I replied, I am an honest person, sincere, punctual, and inquisitive to learn and I need this job so I can support my family. Then recruiters asked me about my family; I told them the truth about my family and then they said, tell us in Hindi, and I told them everything, even where I was working. They said, you are hired but you will be under six months' probation period, where you will trained with English Communication Skills and would be tested on the floor while making calls to foreigners, And, I said, yes, they took my documents and I signed a couple of monogrammed pages and they gave me an offer letter with the remuneration mentioned eight thousand five hundred rupees a month. And I was so thrilled that I finally done it.

And now room where I was living needed to be changed because homeowner was increasing the rent, so we moved in a newly rented house whose rent was comparatively genuine, but the saga of room-changing kept on. After every four-five-month rooms were changing and then new, and then new, and I was being restless now paying house rents and there was no privacy at all.

I started feeling suffocated, anyone would come and peek in our room, and would tell to run the fan slow, electricity gets consumed, the landlord would tell that they would increase our rent, so on so many things and incidents collectively drained me out, which triggered the thought of having our own house and buying a land and a house was not my cup of tea. So, I decided to persuade my mother that if she would return her home and reconcile with father whatever they had done earlier, keep it aside but she resisted with anger and hate and warned me if I ever forced her with this thought of moving to our father's house, she would poison herself and everything will be finished, it scared me to death. But humiliation that we were going



through. She never understood, and but stayed adamant and never agreed to my suggestion.

One day I got very depressed and frustrated that I decided either I should get in my father's house, or I will end up getting in the hospital, because staying in that tenant atmosphere, I was tired of humiliation and having no privacy. But before that I decided to go to the women police cell to take a few suggestions from the women perspectives. And, one day I went to the women police cell, and I met a station house officer, as I entered her office, I touched her feet and asked for help in terms of suggestion that can cost lives, because mother had threatened to end her life and if she would not have agreed, I would have ended mine because of the psychological wreck and all the burden I was buried underneath.

I told the women police officer that my parents are divorced, and I am living with my mom, brother, and paternal uncle on a tenant basis. It is very hard to survive and meet daily needs, since we have our father's house. I also wanted to know if I would go back to my father's house to live, would I break any law where I am inciting my mother to end her life? And I also told her that my mother says, that if I ever tried to go my father's home, she will commit suicide and everything will be finished, I told the police officer that I care about my mother, her feelings and I don't want anything happening to her, so I requested her for the guidance. I requested her by saying that you are also a female, and you can understand her heart and mind appropriately. She replied, you go at your father's residence, or you will keep facing this humiliation and never-ending hardships. I acknowledged her advice and decided to go home, but also making sure that nothing could affect my mother's emotions.

And I came back at our rented house and shared everything with my brother, my brother was least interested what I was doing because he was busy saving money, but I sparked his mind inducing the thought, that if he would support my cause before mother, he could save more money. I told him, that please try to gain mother's confidence and persuade her to come with us at father's house because eventually we must get down to our roots, so let's make our lives a little easy by making some big decisions and wise efforts. And finally, brother agreed to do so, and while having meals, we would talk and try to make our mother understand, that whatever has happened, we could change nothing.

And, now I started discussing about home, father, and all the hardships of managing household things with mother and telling her that because of your (father and mother's decision) adamant nature we are paying the for something what we haven't caused, please understand this, your two sons are grown up now, we are not kids anymore, we can talk with father, can take care of both of you, we will protect you in case anything happens against your will. Please reconcile with your husband for sake of your children, even if you don't want to live with him, we will support you wherever you want to live, but please don't talk or think about ending your life. It really hurts to see you crying and going through the pain, now the time has come where you can count on us.

I wanted this phase of pain and misery to get over so that as a family we can have our peaceful life. I would talk about us returning to our father's home because living on rent and bearing unnecessary humiliation was not what I was looking for after paying money to the homeowners and then bearing the invaded privacy. Every day started getting so tensed and painful. Gradually mother started resisting the conversations,

and we would encourage her to please tell us what she was afraid of; I assured her that I am educated enough to handle whatever consequences would rise but requested her not to leave and desert us, stay with us, united we would rise and get justice but scattered we would perish.

And, instead of supporting us and talking openly with us, she decided to stop talking, now she would never allow us to talk to her nor she would reply to what we wanted to know or comprehend whatever we wanted to make her understand. Days and weeks gone by, the stress level in me was skyrocketing, and then my brother and I; we both decided to move our belongings to our father's house and for that we needed to have a plan upfront before taking this major decision. Because getting in our father's house was not a simple task. All the frustration, pain, restlessness was strengthening me and violent at the same time, but I kept everything suppressed with the help of my mindfulness talking to my inner core that I am in a do or die situation, so guide me wisely.

That is how, I restarted visiting my grandmother and father, while visiting grandmother for the first time after such a long time, she asked me, why did I leave the place where she had sent me? I told her that your claimed courteous son was treating me like a servant, and he did not pay me any money, so I had to escape from there and now I was living on a rented house and my life was going through a very hard time.

And I dropped a thought into her mind; I told her that my brother and I have decided to return home along with our mother. And she was shockingly pleased and asked me, how your mother would agree to return? I told grandmother that I will take care of both mother and father with everything. And she said she wanted to discuss it with her daughter who lived

nearby, she talked about this all with her daughter- and son-in-law and they somehow agreed to the fact that sons will take care of their father.

Grandmother's daughter asked me. If my intentions were something else, I told her; I want to cure what my father is going through and I need your help in this, this way your brother will feel better, and I will also help my father and mother to reconcile whatever difference they have or had. And now she wanted to know the plan. I told her that before I get my mother here; I want my father to feel normal, which was only possible if he could get admitted to the Psychiatric hospital for his treatment for a few weeks. And, father's sister told me, it is impossible for you to take him to the hospital, because he is so powerful and wouldn't be lured to get handled in any way.

I explained to her a charted plan about how would I take my father to the Psychiatric hospital? I showed to her. What if I hire a van and get him in the vehicle somehow? And, she said, your father would never get into the van because he would doubt that he is being taken to the hospital based on earlier experiences he had. And then I suggested her, I would request some villagers; there would be some people from the village whom he already knows and have reliable communication with, a few men who know him would pull over the van, while father would go to your house and while pulling over, he would be told that his mother (my grandmother) is not feeling okay and she has been taken to the hospital and he would never resist.

And she asked me, if I was sure, what was I doing? I replied yes, as far as I have observed his nature that he would never object to get in the van if he is told about his mother's critical health. And after setting up this plan. I kept visiting grandmother and her daughter for a week or so to mark my presence, to make



sure they feel confident and consider this plan as a legitimate collective effort to get father into the hospital. And, in this manner, I requested to set up a maintained chaos that no one would tell grandmother about how we will execute this plan.

No clues, no leaks, what time, what place and how because once grandmother would get conscious, she wouldn't be able to hide it from her son and father would eventually sense it, that our plan could get ruined easily and would block any future communication with everyone. I had already paid some amount in advance to the van driver and fixed the time and also told the driver that hope for a lucrative result means I would pay him more money once the job is completed and requested him to co-operate with the hours and situation, I also told the driver not to tell anything about this to anyone. Then, a day before, I discussed everything in detail with everyone involved in this and hired a truck to bring our belongings from the rented house to father's house.

Next day, I executed the plan and as I received a call from the driver that he has gotten father in the van and being taken to the Psychiatric hospital and I asked him about the real time situation, if father was violent or resisting, he said no he is silent. I felt good and now; I rushed to the psychiatric hospital and made the authorities aware that my father is so violent, and he is being brought up here in the van. I also expressed my concerns and fear. What if my father would run away and all the time and money spent would go in the drain? Then authorities made a few security guards aware of the situation, then security guards assured me that no one can or runs away once the patient is in the hospital.

And I was so relieved to learn that because that reply seemed to be strengthening my efforts and bringing me one step closer



to my aim to get in the house peacefully. I also told the security guards that I would be visible after he is admitted to make him feel that I came to know about him getting admitted here, in the hope to get his heart may get a spark that his son has come to rescue him and if it could make any difference to his thought process and it could help to eradicate his aversive behavior.

In no time, the van arrived in the hospital and father was soon admitted for his treatment; this entire process took me six hours to execute half of the plan and a second half remained in the progress. In the evening, I called the truck driver and asked him how long would he take to reach at our rented house in the city? The driver replied. He would be there in a couple of minutes and then I made a phone call to my brother and told him to facilitate everything carefully as I was in the hospital.

After some time, I received a phone call from my brother, that he has started loading our belongings into the truck, further it took a couple of hours to finish loading. And after loading my brother called me and informed me that it would take three hours to reach at our father's residence and then unloading would take the same amount of time it took while uploading. I told my brother and the driver to wait at a decided location, where I would join them because I had to pay the money to the driver too for his trucking. And, finally, the room was emptied at night and brought the stuff at my father's residence in the midnight and after sleeping in the father's house.

Next morning, I went to the hospital to see my father and saw him lying there in the hospital's park. I was scared inside to talk to him and yet I tried to seem easy and asked him, how was he doing? He did not talk to me. I was so polite to him, and I understood he is feeling tied-up in the hospital; I told him, soon, he will be free from the hospital, I told him, dad you are

not alone and I am with you, my brother is with you, and we have brought all our stuff at your house, and we will live together now, and everything will be all right. And then I talked to doctors and asked them how long it would take to run him through the treatment and every single detail that I needed to get along.

After some time, I left for my father's house, as I arrived there; I met with father's sister, grandmother and saw the culprit Kalia. He was there too gossiping and sipping tea. Then he asked me, your father is all well, why did you take him to the hospital? I replied to cure him. He said, there is nothing wrong with him. I asked him, if there is nothing wrong with him, then, why have you people been feeding him on the Psychotropics Drugs then? He said he is in a deep depression because of your mother.

And I asked him, what about him being recognized with Schizophrenia? He said, "Son you are young now, you don't know about things. I immediately asked, what things? What things are you talking about? What things are you hiding from me? What things you don't want me to know? And then father's sister yelled at me that don't talk to my brother like this and then I returned in my room at my father's house.

At night, I was overwhelmed, and my thought process was swiftly churning my brain. Then I calmed myself and realized everything I wanted to do was already done. Now I had to deal with everyone tactfully. Now, no one could have thrown me out because all my belongings were there in my father's house, which was not purchased by him. That was ancestral property, and knowing this fact, it was the weapon against the odds.



## SQUARE UP



After moving to my father's house, it gave me a relief from the stress of paying hefty money which was being spent on a rented house and all other utilities. I understood that having your own house has a peace of mind and security that I had missed all my life.

Now, I was free from the lingering time hands of the clock and blocks of the calendar, these things were not bothering me anymore. This feeling of security was in my mind, but this New Haven was very scary even though I had gained a sense of not bearing anymore financial burden, because the aversiveness in the minds of my father, grandmother, and paternal aunt and that Kalia had strong intentions to kick me out of the house anyhow. Yet I had no other options either, so I started learning how to live with my father and grandmother.

After almost a week, they discharged my father from the psychiatric hospital with a comparatively calm mind and brought home. While the hospital authorities were preparing

his patient file to discharge him, I asked doctors for the Mental Illness Certificate from the doctors but they denied providing that detail, later on I understood that doctors denied the certificate because of Kalia's brother who was a doctor had influenced the serving doctors to not to issue any kind of mental illness certificate, because he was aware of the conspiracy of snatching the land where his brother had established a poultry farm. But somehow, I managed to get one prescription paper of the hospital which was sufficient as a proof of his mental illness, on which it clearly mentioned that he was being given psychotropic drugs for Schizophrenia.

The reason I wanted to have his mental illness certificate because I had sensed the fear of losing everything because my father and grandmother were not happy about us getting back to the house, and this aversiveness was being induced into their minds by the people who were close to grandmother for property gains. And these people were Father's sister and Kalia- these two people planned to snatch everything because of our absence that I knew they would mischievously outplay grandmother by taking the benefits of her emotional bonds with all the people who were associated with her.

I remembered everyone's raised eyebrows, smirking faces, eyes full of aversion. Father's sister was unhappy of our return to the house. Because, they had been sitting on the land which was given to them as a shelter for asylum by father's elder brother because Sita Devi was married to a defense person who a Pakistani refugee settled in India during the partition of India and Pakistan, and as per the state laws of Jammu and Kashmir Pakistani refugees were not entitled to get the Permanent Residency of the state, this law kept them away from purchasing and selling the land.

That is why when father's elder brother gave Sita Devi and her husband a shelter for asylum in the ancestral property, he never entitled that land in their name which they wanted too badly. If we would have never returned home, after grandmother's death, they would have gotten all the land in their name because for the society they were taking care of my grandmother and father but with ill intentions and then our existence and identities would have had endangered. Just in case, if I had not made the moves on right before the years grandmother passed away, we would be homeless by now.

After getting home, the first difficulty was how to stay at home for most of the time, so that these people wouldn't throw our belongings either by themselves or by inciting father or brainwashing grandmother. These people were so greedy, and they were fully backed-up with Kalia's support, who had mischievously gotten the leased land on his name forever. He did not leave a chance to see my grandmother and father vulnerable and won their minds by offering them money time to time and psychotropic drugs which resulted my father became aggressive and violent if medicines were not given to him on time.

After knowing all of facts and seeing actual faces behind the mask, I searched over the internet about schizophrenia and matched the symptoms that my father was showing. After an extensive search I contacted Citizens Commission of Human Rights, USA and learned the side effects of the Psychotropic Drugs which were being given to my father for a long time. This so called considered a son of my grandmother Kalia was educated among uneducated people in my family, so he took the maximum advantage to steal everything he could have. Eventually I found out that these psychotropic drugs had already hollowed my father's senses completely.



Kalia was so sneaky, for the society and my paternal family he was doing a noble cause by giving those psychotropic drugs as a medicine to keep my father under control, whereas they were not aware of the side effects he was struggling with, the moment my father would get aggressive and uncontrolled, they would consider it as if he was missing his children and because of his wife is not around. These people of paternal family had poisoned his brain with a maximum suspicion of his wife had left him to elope with someone else.

After extensive research, I found out that whenever my father was not given any medicine or skipped it by chance, he would go against his family members, especially against Kalia and his sister Sita Devi, even though he was beyond his consciousness. I figured out that there was certainly something suspicious that these people of my paternal family never wanted my father to be in his real senses, because the moment he would talk gentle, he often would call me nicely but right after he was drugged, he would go against me.

Some people may argue and give their own theories how things go when someone is schizophrenic but what I have discovered by staying awake all nights and making notes of all the movements and actions of my father that somehow gradually these people of my paternal family managed to get a way to make him to lose his senses. And why wouldn't have they done; they wanted easy gains by keeping a line drawn between our family.

I understood that it would cause a huge trouble in case if he doesn't get medicines on time because once these psychotropic drugs are stopped; the results are devastating for the psychologically challenged patients, eventually they would end up taking their own lives by suicidal attempts. No matter

how worst the activities of my father were, I never wanted him to suffer for what he was not capable to comprehend, I wanted him to live peacefully for whatever it would have cost me. I wanted to reunite my parents; I wanted to see my parents together, laughing ever for once. But all these people were sailing so far by holding hostage my father's mind.

And, to fulfill the requirement of the medicines for my father, I needed to have a job security where I could afford all the expenses to buy medicine for my father and food for my own survival. And so, I started looking for a job to support my existence; I started leaving for the city to look for a job in the morning and used to return before the sunset. I still remember, all the times I had gone to look for a job, while returning I would see father's sister and her family grouped together and conspiring something and every time I entered the house, they will scatter themselves here and there and tell grandmother and father that they would return shortly, And, they would peek into my room and often check my belongings, and would ask me where have I been, what did I purchase, what did I eat and what was I carrying in the bag or pocket. They invaded my privacy as much as they could have.

After struggling to find a job, a couple of few weeks later, I finally found a job as computer operator in a Tour and Travels Company in the Jammu City. I started leaving for work before the sunrise and used to return after sunset. This way I started earning some money to support myself and purchasing medicine for my father to see him in a serene state. This continued for a few months and one day I was busy at my work when I received a call from a residential neighbor, and he informed me that your house is on fire.

My neighbor asked me, where are the keys of your room? I told him where the keys were. I asked him, what things are burned down and is my computer safe? He said everything is burned down, come home as soon as you can because there is LPG cylinder in it and no one is risking getting in, and if it bursts, then you would be responsible for it. I overwhelmingly called my boss and told him that I received a call from my neighbor, and I need to go home urgently because my house is on fire and there is an LPG cylinder that may explode at any time.

As I was alone in the office, so I requested my boss to come quickly so that I could leave as soon as possible before the LPG cylinder explodes. My boss quickly arrived at the office and asked me about the details. Then my boss offered me ten thousand rupees in advance as a financial assistance. I was so insecure to take that much amount of money as help thinking that how would I repay it because of overthinking but he was the best employer I had ever worked for.

I hesitatingly told my boss that I don't need money right now, if I needed it in a few days, I would definitely ask for help. And I left the office way to home. While traveling to home, I was thinking, how is it possible that my house could catch fire? Everything was well taken care of; whenever I used to move out, I would always detach all the plugs from the socket, I used to turn off the knob of the LPG stove, a lot of thoughts altogether were probing the probable cause of my house catching fire. While I was nearing my house, I dialed fire emergency services for help and the operator said; you need to call fire department of your area, your area doesn't fall under our jurisdiction, I asked him if he could route my call so, he said, dial another number and so I did. I didn't know whom to approach, how to get help from fire emergency services.

After an hour by passenger bus when I arrived home; I saw everything was turned into ash, the recently purchased rice bag for a month of ration was burned, wooden furniture, computer, telephone, books, curtains, shoes, clothes, everything was vanished only ash was there. And, then a neighbor who had called me over the phone to inform me about the fire came and told me how he struggled to set the fire off, he told me they were afraid if cooking fuel cylinder wouldn't have had been taken care off, it would have been more devastating for the people around. I thanked him for setting off the fire. He was repeatedly saying that there was a cylinder in your house, and he was afraid that his house would get explode too just in case, I apologized for him being afraid and told him, it was not my fault; I had turned everything off.

And all other people were standing watching me reacting to things, but I represented myself as a strong person who didn't value if things were gone, I was talking bravely. I talked to everyone in a serious and matured way, but as everyone left, I started crying heavily, for all those things, ration, clothes, were purchased with my hard-earned money, no one had given me a single penny to buy things, I had saved money staying hungry, eating one meal a day.

Meanwhile, my brother arrived home too, I had phoned my brother way back home and told him that our room was burned down, the fire left nothing. We looked at each other's face and turned the faces down and started crying heavily but suppressing and I was telling myself; I was telling him that nothing is left, and I told him it is fortunate that I arrived earlier or maybe cooking fuel cylinder would have caused more damage beyond our imagination and maybe to other people; we are lucky that it did not blast. But the fact was that only our



room was burned, not the entire house, my father's room was untouched by the flames.

We were in so much pain, after thinking rationally, I knocked on father's room and he opened the door yelling at me, what do you want mother\*ker? I asked him how come my room caught the fire and nothing burned down elsewhere. He said, he doesn't know, and that was a plain lie, I read his face and then I asked grandmother, how did it happen? And she replied that she doesn't know she was not there. I understood their creepy hearts and ignorant brains. We both were crying, and they were eating their meals.

Then and there I cut all the emotional chords after seeing their inhuman expressions; their eyes were full of aversion and hearts were happy that we had lost everything, they were convinced that now; we were scared to live in this house, and we will leave this place and run away, that is what their intentions were. It was even more painful because when I heard the news of my house was on fire, my heart got arrested and I was thinking about my father and grandmother if they were safe. And their minds were certainly poisonous.

Evening was passing so slowly, after an hour when the fire had burned down everything and we had started cleaning the room. Fire brigade arrived by the time everything was turned into ash already, I totally disliked the fire brigade response because, they always arrive late, I had called them forty minutes earlier when I heard the news of my house was on fire. A few media people arrived at our residence when we were cleaning up the coals, ashes and cooling the sweltering windows, floors, and walls.



Our horrified eyes were cooling our painful emotions, nostrils were also inhaling the air at a slow pace, and we needed sometime to cry, to think and talk to each other. After everyone left, we checked there were no clothes left to put on, only the clothes we had put on. My brother had an extra uniform because he was working at the fuel station. I only had a shirt, trouser and one underwear. Now we were hungry, we carefully picked burned rice, boiled it and started eating with salt.

In the meantime, our neighbors got us two plates of food for dinner, we resisted taking the food, but they encouraged us to eat, and we ate the food and thanked them. This was a compassionate act by them, I am so grateful for those two plates of dinner. When I was boiling, burned, and smoked rice to eat, grandmother and father were looking at us. We were in pain; I was expecting that if they would say once that if we needed something to eat; they did not, maybe they felt nothing, because my room was on fire, theirs was safe. I wished I should have died the moment I was born.

After we had dinner, now it was time for us to sleep, and the fire had turned our beds into big chunks of coal, yet we had a plastic cot with iron-legs, it was partly burned but space was enough to lie down; we slept on the opposite side on the same cot, I remember, it was a little cold outside and I could feel the dew wetting my skin and clothes. My brother was tired of working all day and he fell asleep quickly, but I couldn't sleep, all night I was trying to sleep and waking up with the trauma of losing everything, the memories of things, how money was saved for each item, how many meals I had not eaten, how many miles I had walked, how many sleepless nights and excitement and hope to buy new things to support ourselves.

Everything was gone, only horrific memories were left. But we were thankful for being alive, The universe transcended us through a deadly night to a new hopeful morning, All night thoughts of ending my life was hovering me, and then deep down an emotional bond with my brother was keeping me alive that Neeraj you are capable of doing things, live for your brother, support him and then your struggle will be over once he is settled, get him married. And I fought with those gloomy thoughts of suicide and suppressed my emotions, like a profound burial. During that night I was waking up in the middle of night, I was looking at how grandmother and father were sleeping carelessly, and we were under the sky. Night helped me to get prepared for the real battle now.

Next morning was so painful, my brain was accustomed to have tea in the morning, as I woke up to prepare tea and realized that everything was burned down, there were no tea bags, or leaves left, that is how the habit of having tea in the morning got broken. And reality showed me a way to form a new habit of not having tea in the morning along with breakfast. We had nothing for breakfast, my brother left for his work saying that he would eat something there. And I thought I would have tea in the office and would adjust for some days like this.

One good thing was that the month was concluding in a few days, that was a pleasant sign to get salary by the end of the month, a fresh hope was born to survive for some more days. After getting the salary, the first challenge was to stock up the ration for one month and keep the bus fare to survive and yield another month's salary. After purchasing ration and all other necessities, somehow, I managed to fix a morning beverage for me. So, every morning I would wake up and fill the water and start making sugared lemonade to fill my stomach, so I don't feel hunger and stay empty stomach. I skipped lunch and had

only tea with some snacks I used to get during work, and at night I would cook whatever brother will bring, and next morning I would get ready in the same clothes until I got salary.

My boss insisted me so much to take monetary help from him and denied it because I was aware of the fact, if I took the money just now, I would have to return it too which I was not able to take any monetary help, I was waiting for my wages. I would get ready in the same clothes every day, I used to wash collars and cuffs of the formal dress shirt twice a week and wash shirt once a week, and trouser once. After arriving home, I would comfort myself with a set of towels which were not burned because I had put those to dry outside. I would take off my clothes and stay in towel all the time and won't get out unless I had to go for work.

And, while working I would work so hard in a hope to get a reward for my sincerity towards my work, I was putting all my efforts to earn money; I was doing everything, whatever my boss would tell me, either relevant or irrelevant; I needed to earn the money badly; I was hoping he would give me some incentives; I needed money that shouldn't be returned; I was not in a position to be under any sort of debt or stress.

Finally, I got my wages on the completion of the calendar month; I was so happy to receive my money, which wasn't so much but was something I could make use of, I was so thankful to have my wages because If I wouldn't have managed to stay on my job because of the emotional devastation caused because of the fire tragedy, I would have sunk deeply where maybe my scream would have never had heard anywhere. The

moment I received money; I felt confident, and I came back home.

At night I would think how to save more money, because I had to purchase a few clothes too, needed ration too, my feet used to hurt walking for so long, stomach was bloating because of hunger and excessive intake of tea, my eyes started getting dark circles, I started looking older than my age; I was dying to survive. I would calculate the price of the things before purchasing things, I would count the things like; how many times can I take a shower with one bar of soap, I would count the salt with spoons, I used to make sure I don't eat all the times otherwise most of the money would be spent on eating.

Traveling was the most important aspect for me to keep moving ahead, and I continued on this pattern for months, years and after some years I had a few clothes, but I made a habit that I will not purchase new clothes until it turns into a rag, even rags I would sew and make it wearable and then would purchase something more durable that can last longer, this way I learned about the quality of fabric, I stopped purchasing ration until the last grain is consumed. I started saving money now, I started purchasing the best things for me. I was recovering from the trauma and scars were diminishing with my skin was getting darker and dull. I was learning to be on my own, we brothers were one leg and arm support for each other, but my arm was stronger, but leg was weaker in terms of monetary weight.

As I was passing the day and nights on a weak thread that I was strengthening with the honey and wax of my patience and small sacrifices that I was making to keep my soul in the body. I started sculpturing my world, my grandmother, father, and paternal relatives were unhappy and jealous of the way I stopped caring for them now. I felt that I was really an



orphan and all these people around me wanted to eat me like hungry wolves. I was realizing that I was getting bitter now, but that bitterness was naturally framed with the help of the universe for my protection otherwise staying sweet and easy cup of tea for other people, I would have gotten consumed totally. The Universe helped me; it balanced my existence.

Since my childhood I was taught and told that parents' love for their children is endless, I saw never-ending love in other families and all the people I ever met in my life shared their thoughts, and how much did they love their parents, and how much their parents loved them, but I could never understand how true it is and how it feels like to be loved, I knew how it feels not to be loved.

For me love was only a polite talk, if my parents would have talked to me and listened to me, I wouldn't need anything, I wanted them to know what I wanted to tell them; I wanted to make them listened to my heart. It never happened. And I have also heard that grandmothers love their grandchildren, but this part was not in my life either; she hated me until her last breath; she treated me separately as an intruder. I met so many people in my life while working at different levels of my career. I have seen no one this heartless; she used to call me filthy blood. Father always tuned his mind up to what others told him.

There is not even a single time when my father ever hugged me, or even talked to me politely. I worked so hard and did everything to win their hearts or to gain their attention where at least they would talk to me with respect, trying to win their hearts before I lost myself. I could have sacrificed everything if they had even asked me to work on roads or at least accepted me as a servant, by any means I starved like a fish for water to get love.



As time passed by, I learned that nothing would stay forever, If they hated me today maybe they will love me too, I always held myself from falling and this instinct was naturally helping me to stay strong. Soon, grandmother's health started getting worse, she once fell sick, I asked if she needed water, she said, no she doesn't want to drink because I was filthy blood. I withdrew myself to protect my soul from the humiliation.

Since, grandmother was sick, her daughters and Kalia were planning to sell the entire ancestral land, for that process they used to pick her up in the car, drop her at night and father stayed all the time with her. Grandmother was going through her last days, as she was almost becoming unconscious day by day. They used to take her in the morning and drop her at night. I was wondering what was happening. My intuition had signaled me that Neeraj a big trouble would come in your way. I used to remain stressed because of the silence of paternal relatives and indirect emotional torture.

And, within a week, I started seeing a lot of cars stopping by in front of our house, people pointing fingers on our house and the land behind our house. And one day two men stepped out from the car and started measuring the land, and my doubt turned into reality. I asked them, what are they doing in our land, they said, kid this is our land and we have purchased it for one crore, and I was shocked to learn it. I asked them, how could you purchase this land, we are not aware of anything. They said, talk to your father, and then I asked my father about this. He answered nothing.

After that, I moved to the district court to seek legal help, before writing an application, they would ask me about the Khasra Number of the land, I was not aware of it. Then, I consulted with a petitioner writer who sits outside the

courtroom and requested him to write an application through which I could start the process to know the land record and put a stay on the land to know the status of the house we were living in. I got so overwhelmed because this was the last thing, they could have done to desert me and even though; they did not leave any chance to spare compassion.

I was scared of being thrown out of the house if my father would have had sold the house too, My mind armored my brain, I got proactive and started visiting sub-districts, district revenue departments but the person who was dealing in this land probably had political connections and that is why and how these people successfully done this land fraud, why do I call it a fraud because this land was ancestral, my father had not purchased it, father's two sons were alive, our consent was not taken, we did not sign any document even though we were adults at the time that land was sold and we were treated as non-existent. They manipulated the documents and sold the land.

After the land was sold, still I was fighting for our existence, I visited every single door of Regional Revenue Office in the village, Sub-district Revenue Office, District Revenue Office, Financial Commissioner of Revenue Office, Police Stations, Courts, visited the houses of then MLAs and kneeled down before each person who possibly could have had helped me, but everyone seemed to be influenced either politically or monetarily. They never treated me righteously. They humiliated me and harassed me, made me run here and there. I cried, folded my hands, touched their feet to have mercy on me, I told them I am alone; I don't have money to get justice in the court; because the property dealer who had purchased this land had filed caveat from the High Court.

I begged like a beggar for the justice by explaining my situations, circumstances and how these people wanted to throw us out of our ancestral land. I told all the concerned authorities that I don't have anyone to rely on except myself. Those people listened to me but did what they were told to, I saw a few people who understood my concerns, but they were the ones who have no control over situations, and they couldn't do anything. I approached everyone from the dust to the throne of every department. Only a few listened, but the ground people did low, corrupted, and rogue jobs because they valued money. From my personal experience I think/thought probably these people in the government departments are taught how to harass people who don't have money because they will do everything if you pay a bribe.

After our land was sold, I wanted to know the status of my house and the land, what was left and what was sold, I moved official applications to the concerned revenue departments, they would do everything formally, like sign your document and initiate the process. But they are told beforehand, if someone comes from this Khasra Number, don't give that person information, how do I know this? I observed it because every time I went to my regional Patwar Khana (Land Record Room) to get the land record or status from the concerned officers, they always said, you have sold all the land, now what are you coming here for?

And, then I had to start from scratch that my parents were divorced, and my father doesn't like me, he doesn't want me to stay here, so they have conspired and sold it illegally, they would never give me any of the land record. Patwaris (accountant in the Rural Land who serves the administrative position) never did my work up to my satisfaction, they would tell me something, write something else in the Urdu language

that I could not read or understand, they would make a document and instruct me to get it signed from their senior officer, they would give me the oldest records which would not solve any problems, for every application, they would derail me.

And, every time I would stand up and move a new application, and then officers got tired of seeing my face all over again and again because they would yell at me for visiting them every day, they never listened to me, but they always stranded me by saying that we have some other works of the department too, go ask your father, don't eat our heads. They behaved ruthlessly, this concerned revenue department failed me, they were highly corrupted people, if someone at some position was honest, their honesty got deterred either with political influence or honesty got sold in coins.

When I say Revenue Department, I visited everyone, from then Peon (because these people exactly know when their officers are coming, when will they be available and what time they won't be), then Patwari of my Village, then Tehsildar of Concerned Tehsil, the Concerned Naib Tehsildar of Tehsil, then Deputy Commissioner of my Concerned district, then Finance Commissioner of Revenue Department, then Finance Minister of Jammu and Kashmir.

Not just these officers but also wrote to then Chief Secretary of Jammu and Kashmir, then Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir, then Prime Minister of India, the President of India by all possible means of communications.

I emailed my concerns to everyone, but no one replied to my email; I filed for RTI (Right to Information) I was never given the information which could have helped me to pursue justice; I



filed RTIs they discarded my RTI appeals after then Deputy Commissioner had seen my face; I was understanding, how system works, if you have someone's reference, they will be obliged to assist, otherwise, they seek something else in an indirect way without leaving a trace, multiple rejections indirectly, peons will tell that their officer is busy today, today officer did not sign the files, come tomorrow, today officer has not come, today officer has meetings, officer just left before you arrived, officer says, they would call you go home, everything uncertain and designed to present as situational. The way I was treated was inhumane, like you are wounded, and you are asking for the ointment from the people who have given you the wounds because they are the masters.

I also submitted my grievance to then Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir, my grievance was forwarded to the Regional Police Station, I was called there to present my concern, first the reporting officer treated me nicely and he phoned the property dealer who caused all the mess in land purchase, after he came there, reporting officer's behavior was totally changed, I sensed either he was stuffed with money or influenced with political power.

I lost hope there, then I was treated like I had made a huge mistake by approaching the chief minister cell, then the reporting officer and the property dealer told me to follow them, I followed them in a room, where they were talking about something funny, and then a police officer asked me, what do I want? I said, I wanted to know the status of the land, and, then no one answered, and they ignored my question, reporting officer told me to sign a document, I denied signing the document as they wrote it in Urdu language; I had lost trust in the police department because these people were scaring me with their ignorance.



Their way of talking with a person in vulnerability was so scary. I requested the reporting officer that I don't want to sign a document I am not aware of; he forced me; I resisted, and I told him; I need to speak to your Superintendent of Police; I traveled there, and told him the situation and how reporting officer being conspired was forcing me to sign a document I was not aware of what they wrote there and I don't trust those people there,

Superintendent of Police asked me what do I want? I said I wanted to sign a document where I could understand what they wrote. He phoned the concerned police station and told me to go there and make your statement. And, as I went back to the police station, the reporting officer yelled at me and said, you don't have trust in the Police Department; I replied I don't know about trust, but I know that I should not sign any document I cannot read or understand.

He said, you are too smart, huh? I did not utter a word; I wrote my statement in the English language, and I signed the document and went back home. After this complaint was closed, and no one asked me if I wanted to pursue the case. Then I realized that they know that I don't have anyone, neither have money, so they could do anything and everything whatever they wanted.

Then I went to the crime branch office; I met with then SSP Crime Branch officer and I elaborated the problem I was going through and he helped me by assigning an officer who got the documents for me and that is how I was helped to get the documents. And they escalated my case to the regional police station. And then Patwari called me and told me to come at the Patwarkhana, as I went there, he was saying, Neeraj, you have harassed me with that crime branch officer who had taken

documents from me, he said, that the person who had purchased the land from the property dealer will sue you for two crore rupees for defamation case.

Later that person who had further purchased this land from the property dealer came at my house and threatened me to bulldoze my house, I got so scared because these people were heavily moneyed, and my situation was so horrible, I was being humiliated from every corner. Everywhere I would go these property dealers, the parties who had purchased the land, these revenue officers had contacts so that wherever I would go, they will never do anything.

Once, I visited the nearest police station for help, then Station Housing Officer treated me badly even though I touched his feet, begged for help but he talked to me rudely, he asked, where does your mother live? Who does she live with? Where have you been all these years? I said I was in the orphanage, and he used vulgar slang and deserted me. Station Housing Officer also accused me that I was using slang for then Deputy Commissioner and claimed he had a voice recording, I was innocent and I knew I have not said such words as he was accusing me, then I told him, sir, if you have a voice recording, you would have locked me up by now and I have not done anything and he again used vulgar slang and said you argue so much.

I was reporting to this station housing officer for help that how these people are influencing and raising barriers so I couldn't be heard, these people had cars and they would commute anywhere easily before me and warn me of consequences and laugh at my vulnerability and said people like you get killed because here huge money is involved. After hearing this sentence, I was emotionally traumatized,

and I couldn't move out early morning and late- night, I used to walk being scared that don't know when some vehicle may hit me and twice there was a near-miss with property dealer's car because I used to go for a morning walk and he was the inhabitant of the nearby village.

These revenue officers were so cunning, they would talk to me sweetly but write nothing on papers. These revenue officers used to tell me you are wasting your time, leave this battle and live your life. I was so shocked to see. How can they ruin someone's life, and they see it with such ignorance? I was being drained because of their humiliating behavior and I was at the verge of losing my life; I was so tired of fighting with these monsters alone.

And, one day I was watching Indian News Channel, I used to see how some suicide news come up and how media, police, politicians would spark their ideas on the suicide. I thought this is the only way to draw the attention of media toward my problem.

After watching it, I went to the news channel head office in my area, as I entered the news channel office, I was asked for the reason for my visit, and I told them I have a news which is serious, I used the word seriously, so they listen to me. I was told to sit down, and a glass of water was offered to me, and then I saw a person sitting in the chair and had faced his video camera toward me, and he said, tell me your problem. I described him, how I was a victim of land extortion that I could not live and how no department was cooperating with me.

I was searching for a way out where I can be heard. After listening to me, he said, I suggest you to not go on media

because your life will be finished once it exposes you to the media, and I told him, I don't care about my life; I need justice. Then, he made a call while talking to me to the Deputy Superintendent of Police of my district and briefed him that someone from your area has come here with news that he is not getting any help from the police station and wants to report it to the media. I am sending him to your office and sharing your number. He would talk to you in a while.

After the phone call that journalist told me, go there take my name and tell him whatever you have told me, I was again scared now what if I go there and same people would be there and, they will make fun of me and what if they would lock me up and torture me to sign some blank documents as I had already faced the humiliation? And then I triggered my mind positively what if this person will help you.

So, I visited the Deputy Superintendent of Police with a diminishing hope, but hopefully, maybe something good would come out. As I met with the officer, I introduced myself and presented my concern and he further sent me to the then Tehsildar. Now I was a little energetic that I am at least being referred by Sub-Divisional Magistrate of my district. As I went to meet Tehsildar, he called me and said, what is your problem? I told him my problem, and he said, he must visit the spot and then he marked my application to his junior officer Naib Tehsildar.

I kept visiting the tehsil office every day for a week hoping someone will help me. I also went to meet Naib Tehsildar, and he somehow visited the spot and taken some detail with signatures of the witnesses around. The property dealer whom he had further sold the land had forcibly raised the wall and blocked my window, then Naib Tehsildar ordered the Property

Dealer to leave three feet of land around my window and then I broke the wall that was raised forcibly in my area.

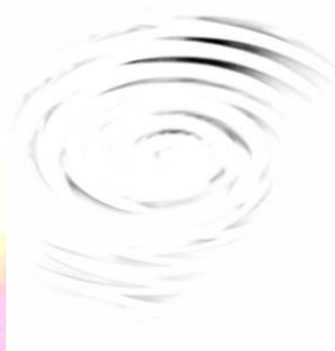
The day I broke the wall, next day the person who had purchased the land came and threatened me he would file a police complaint against me because I had demolished the wall which was forcibly constructed in my area. He used vulgar slang and called me a filthy poor. I couldn't do anything because of my vulnerability. That much I was assisted verbally by the revenue officers, and no documentation was done. And ever since I wanted to know the status of my land, till no one ever told me what the status of my land is, because it is all written in the Urdu language and, I could not read Urdu.

After demolishing the intrusion, I decided to stay available to guard this land so that my stuff can't be thrown out. I worked from home, and then I explored the opportunities and scope of running a business. And then an idea popped up into my mind of offering computer services like printing, online applications and writing resumes, etc. And, finally, I started the business and ever since I am doing this business to support myself.





# RIPPLE



All the years passed by, I thought of my parents together a zillion times, but my parents failed me at their stubbornness. I wanted their helping- hands; they gave me slaps; I wanted a touch of soft vision, but they stayed aversive; I was thirsty for their love and compassion, but they abandoned me and left me distraught for the rest of my life. I got folds on my forehead when I was young. The darkness of sorrows circled my eyes. My heart got arrested so many times it became so soft to burst any time, but my soul covered my scars and time healed the wounds and made me study to face the hardships of inevitable incidents.

I fell and rose so many times, my knees got bruised but I didn't give up, I chose to stand firm to combat the humiliation and resisted living on knees; I learned what hunger and thirst is and how it feels; I learned what happens when the shade is withdrawn over your head and how you strive for a drop of water when you run the endless desert and don't know when it is going to end. I learned to live a life while I lost it already,

For over three decades, I have never experienced what a true laugh is, how it feels to be carefree, I wanted to surrender myself to feel secure in the hands of a caring soul. I wanted someone to stay with me and tell me you carry on I am behind you. I isolated myself because everyone tried to bleed my heart, a few souls I met in my life who helped me to build the cave where I rested during the wild rains and endless dark nights. While growing through the dust, I learned to dust off worries and to remain patient. I would like to present a few suggestions to the couples who are on the verge of divorcing and their children are on the edge of being desolated.

1. Be thankful for having children and never forget the initial desire to have kids registered after you are blessed with one.
2. If you want to know how it feels not having children, ask people who don't have children and they crave for one.
3. If you have differences, sort it out calmly and let your children know, be honest with your children, don't hide the facts and depict the situations. You may get away with words, but it will be found out.



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Best regards,

Neeraj K. Dabgotra

